THE STORY OF SYLVIA

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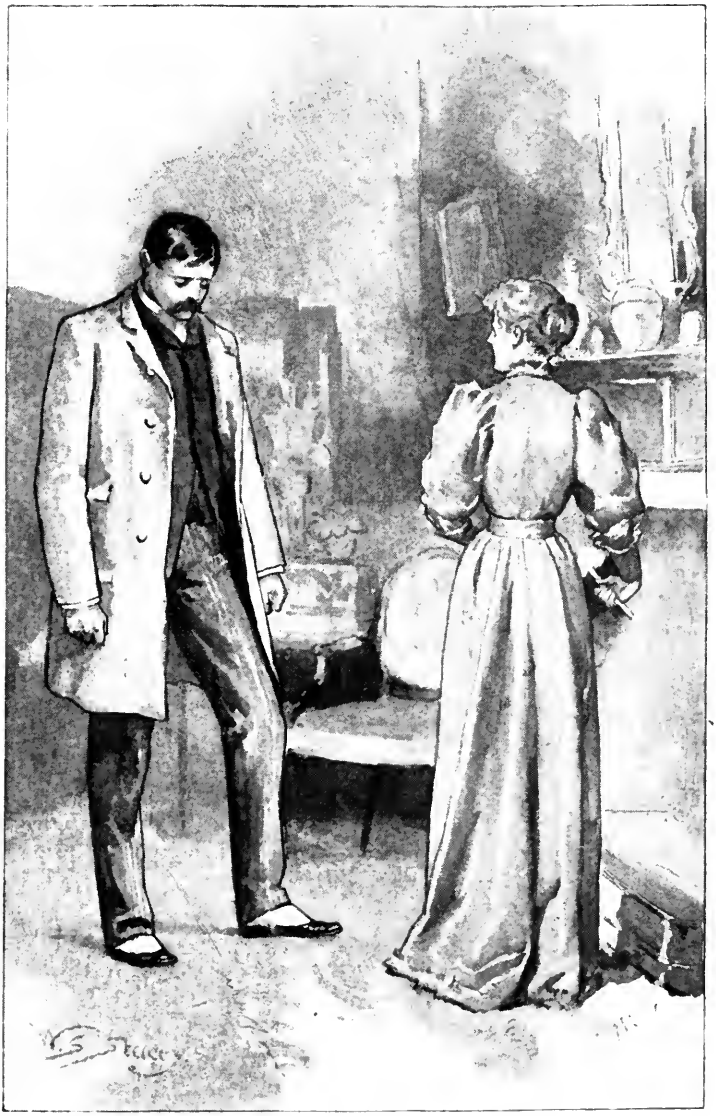

"He stood before her with bent head."

THE STORY OF SYLVIA.

BY

HAMILTON ROWAN,

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CHAPTER I.

AN ELIGIBLE YOUNG MAN.

"HE has three thousand a year of his own, I know on good authority," said Mrs. Carr, in a tone of much satisfaction.

Floss mentally reduced the three thousand to one, and still considered herself in all probability above the mark.

"I have only seen him once, but he appeared to me a very handsome young man; do you not consider him very handsome, my dear?"

"No," said Floss, "I certainly should not call him more than rather good-looking."

"Well, my dear, I am sure I don't know what you consider handsome in a man, then," said Mrs. Carr, reprovingly; "at any rate I am glad to hear your brother has him so much to the house. You know my interest in you, my dear Floss, and for your sake I am very glad."

"I can't see why Harry's having Mr. Murray over

once or twice to shoot should give you any satisfaction on my account," said Floss, a little stiffly.

Mrs. Carr drew her chair a little closer to Floss, and took her unresponsive hand. Very undemonstrative by nature and belonging to a most undemonstrative family, the girl was always disturbed and embarrassed by these caresses.

"Now, my dear Floss," said Mrs. Carr, sinking her voice to a confidential tone, "you know I consider you a very sensible girl, and therefore I am not afraid to speak freely to you. Knowing the interest I take in you for your poor dear mother's sake and your own, you can't be surprised that I have often thought anxiously of your future. I don't want to see you a drudge all your life, and at the Elms you so seldom have the chance of meeting any one at all suitable. You must see yourself how desirable marriage is for you—I assure you this seems to me quite a Godsend."

"I can't say that I look upon it in that light," said Floss, reddening with annoyance; "even if I wanted to, I don't see how I could possibly marry, and as for Mr. Murray—he is by no means the first man Harry has had down for shooting."

"I hope you are not going to be foolishly prudish," said Mrs. Carr, patting Floss's hand serenely; "you know quite well that all Harry's friends have been impossible—simply *impossible!* But Mr. Murray—and he doesn't seem to think too much of himself, or to be at all stand-off, as some of those good regiments are; I hear he goes everywhere he is asked. I have been trying to persuade Mr. Carr to call on them, and then I could have asked him to dinner to meet you;

but you know how difficult it is to make my husband call on anybody. I must persuade him to go before our garden party; it is so pleasant to know young men who are willing to go anywhere."

"I believe they are all willing to accept invitations," said Floss, with an effort to turn the conversation away from Mr. Murray, which she might have known from experience would be useless.

"Who cares about a married man like Captain Atterly—yes, I know he is married, though he has not brought his wife here with him; and the other subaltern, Mr. Shaw, is only a boy, and I don't think he has a farthing. Oh, no! Mr. Murray is the only one possible, and you may be sure there will be a dead set made at him. The way the Grimshaws have run after him already is disgraceful, but then to be sure it is a dreadful thing to have six unmarried daughters—and all of them so plain too. Still, I think she need not be quite so barefaced about it."

Floss had by this time subsided into silence; she knew by experience that all Mrs. Carr required or wished for was a reasonable appearance of interest and an occasional remark.

"You know you may always count on me if you require a chaperon, Floss; I have heard that there is some talk of getting up a dance in barracks. Mr. Coulson was with us on Sunday and he spoke of it, and if you wanted a chaperon for that—?"

"It is very kind of you, Mrs. Carr," said Floss, quietly, "but you know I never go to dances."

"Oh, my dear, circumstances alter cases," said Mrs. Carr, significantly.

"But nothing has as yet altered the fact that I can't dance, and have no money to waste over a dress," said Floss, serenely to all appearance, but with just a little hidden pang of regret.

But Mrs. Carr's thoughts were so engrossed with Mr. Murray and the immediate present, that she scarcely attended to Floss's answer.

"I rather fancy he must belong to the Murrays of Perthshire—the very nicest people if so. There is an Arthur Murray among them who might be the same—I saw, in the army list, that this man's initials are A. C. If so he is the eldest son, and his father must be quite an old man."

"His father is dead, I know," said Floss, and then she wished she had refrained from showing she knew anything on the subject.

"Then he can't belong to that family, and I had quite made up my mind that he did! Well, at any rate it's certain enough about the money, whatever his people may be. The St. Johns—you have heard me speak of the St. Johns?—they knew him when the regiment was at the Curragh, and they say he used to hunt a great deal, which of course he could not have done without money. He had something to do with the Castle, Mrs. St. John thinks, and at any rate he used to go out a great deal, and was very popular. They *did* certainly say they had heard of an engagement to a Lady Lucy something or other, but I never believe reports of that kind."

"I dare say it is true, or quite as true as the rest," said Floss, flushing a little, "I see no reason for disbelieving it; and really, what does it matter to us?"

But Mrs. Carr had the best of all reasons for refusing to believe anything that would interfere so much with her wishes for her favourite.

Floss was driven to say good-bye earlier than she had intended, by the failure of all subjects to supersede that of the interesting Mr. Murray, but even to the last Mrs. Carr was full of him.

"I will do my best to make Mr. Carr call on them," she said, holding Floss's hand; "I should so like to have him to dinner to meet you. Of course I should ask Mr. Shaw as well; I hope I am not one of those people who make conspicuous advances"—Floss recognised this as an allusion to the offending Grimshaws—"but it all depends on my being able to persuade Mr. Carr to call. If he could meet Mr. Murray—or Mr. Shaw—and see how pleasant and civil they are! But there, I must say Mr. Carr is very obstinate when he takes an idea into his head, and he sets down all officers as what he calls 'stuck-up, conceited puppies'; I have wasted my time trying to convince him that Scotch regiments are quite different. Not that we have ever had a regiment of that kind here, Scotch or English, except once, but that he has unluckily never forgotten. Certainly they were very rude; they scarcely every returned calls, and the way they spoke of the people of the neighbourhood! But, as I often say to Mr. Carr, that is no reason for setting down all regiments as the same; and as for these young men—if they do give a dance I shall certainly speak to your father about your going, Floss."

"Oh, please don't!" said Floss, anxiously.

"Nonsense, my dear, you must really let me do

as I like for once. It shall be managed, I assure you."

And Mrs. Carr dismissed her with many nods and smiles and kisses. Floss refrained from arguing the question till the necessity for discussion should arise. She walked home to the Elms, a little ruffled, as she usually was after a visit to the Carrs. With the best intentions in the world, Mrs. Carr generally succeeded in nothing but thoroughly annoying her.

It was not her fault that Floss had attained the mature age of two-and-twenty without having ever been in love, or even had reason to believe any one was in love with her. In vain had that energetic lady planned marriages for her for the last four years with all the eligible young men about Delagherty; in vain had she investigated the financial condition of every fresh detachment that was stationed there, and urged upon Mr. Carr his duties in the way of calling: she had only succeeded—with the kindliest intentions—in annoying Floss, and not in disturbing the friendly indifference of either side.

It was not that Floss was plain—she was not pretty, and her manner was too abrupt and indifferent—still, Mrs. Carr knew many really plain girls who had been very well married indeed. It was not that she had no chances of meeting men; besides her opportunities during her visits to Mrs. Carr, Floss's father was the most sociable of men, and her second brother Harry was the same; they were always having men down to the Elms for shooting or fishing or nothing at all—a very mixed set certainly, that made it perhaps as well that Floss was not too susceptible.

Yet the reason of her indifference was not very difficult to find; if Mrs. Carr had sought a little further, she might have discovered it in the fact that the girl had no time to waste upon thoughts of this description, either in the abstract or otherwise.

The daily effort entailed by the endeavour to make a very small income do the work of one of double the amount, to supply the wants and look after the comforts of seven people, none of whom were willing to be sacrificed to the others, engrossed Floss's time quite sufficiently, leaving little opportunity for wants and wishes of her own. It was seven years now since her mother's death, and then Floss's girlhood had ended. Her mother's task of pinching and contriving had fallen on her shoulders, and very well had she borne it, but it had left her no time to be young or actively happy.

Her father was the gayest and most good-humoured of men, and the pleasantest of companions, but it never entered his head to wonder if Floss had too much thrown upon her; she looked well and cheerful, and what more could be desired? Mr. Egerton had sauntered through life without any great effort of his own: he had lived very comfortably upon his income in his bachelor and early married days, and he felt himself hardly used in these seven children who had come to curtail his comforts. It would have been too much to expect him to give up any of his little pleasures, and certainly his tastes were not expensive. Not that he was unwilling that his children should have their pleasures too; it was upon Floss that the onus of refusing any of the boys' requests was always thrown.

"Certainly, if you wish it, it must be managed somehow," he would say, and when Floss had once or twice asked him how, she had obtained nothing but vague words; it must just be managed if George or Harry, as the case might be, wanted it. But Floss could not view things with the same cheerful confidence.

Harry was his father's own son, thoughtless, idle, and content to live in the present, with perhaps a little more sweet temper and a little less selfishness than Mr. Egerton. He had got through his school-life with as little work and as much amusement as possible, and he was at present supposed to be reading at home for a civil-service exam., though the attractions of fishing daily proved too much for his resolution.

George was quite different; at school he had worked hard, and he had passed brilliantly into the army, but having done this, he seemed content to rest on his laurels, and allow his family liberally to assist his subaltern's pay. George's tastes were not by any means expensive, and all of the most ladylike description, yet somehow he managed to get through a good deal of money, though he never failed to be able to explain the absolute necessity for all he expended.

Then there was Billy, an overgrown boy of sixteen, who was growing up rough and boorish at a second-rate Irish school. But somebody must go to the wall, and Floss was uncomfortably conscious that the twins and Billy had been the ones to suffer. Dicky, the youngest, a sharp but spoiled child of seven, Floss

was herself struggling to instruct, with much consciousness of her own ignorance.

Considering all this, it is not perhaps surprising that she had not very much time to give to her own concerns. Had she had time to spare for her own amusement, money would have been wanting for clothes and such necessaries—money which could not be spared. There lay upstairs, in a box in the lumber-room, the relics of Floss's one gaiety—a white dress, a cheap fan, and a few ribbons.

Just at first, four years ago, it had given her a pang to think of it lying there uselessly, but now it was almost forgotten. She had allowed herself to be persuaded into that much-thought-of ball by Mrs. Carr, for her father went no further than careless approval.

She had managed to convince herself that the dress could be afforded, and that the twins' jackets would do very well for that winter, and consequently for the rest of the year those shabby jackets had been a bitter reproach to her.

Neither had the ball been all felicity: she danced badly, and she was not pretty enough to counterbalance this defect, nor amusing enough, being in truth almost tongue-tied by shyness. It had been a failure in every way, and Floss had made, and kept, a resolution that her first ball should be her last, without too much regret.

She had no lack of occupation, and as for amusement—why there was the garden to work in, which required all her efforts to prevent it from degenerating into a wilderness, since there was no gardener to look after it.

The Elms was a large place—much too large for the Egertons to keep up, with their means. Floss's tidy soul suffered much from the disorder which all her efforts could not restrain. The garden was a large one, and she was obliged to content herself with cultivating a very small part of it and letting the rest run wild; even the two long avenues were apt to become grass-grown and disreputable.

In the fields around the garden Mr. Egerton carried on a little perfunctory farming, which was by no means remunerative, and beyond was the lake, where the boys shot in winter and fished in summer, and which fortunately required no keeping in order. The Elms itself was a large, square, ugly house, standing among a few stray trees and with nothing very particular about it either inside or out.

Floss sometimes felt inclined to envy the Alisons, whose place was only separated from the Elms by a hedge, and who, with much smaller grounds, had a very much larger income, and *such* a pretty house.

It was not nearly as big as the Elms, and was only two storeys high; a long, low building, with jutting corners, and porticoes and quaint windows, and everything about always so entirely neat and in order.

But then Mr. Alison had plenty of money, and only one child; he could have kept up a much larger place than Heath Cottage if he had chosen, but he had come there long ago in less prosperous days, and did not care to leave it.

Floss had to pass by the Alisons' gate on her way home from the Carrs, but the vista of trim lawns and

terraces caused her nothing but satisfaction to-day; indeed she was not given to discontent—it was only when the weeds *would* grow so unnaturally quickly, and the children *would* play on the flower-beds!

CHAPTER II.

FLIRTATION OR FRIENDSHIP?

FLOSS got home rather late for lunch, and found Mr. Murray and Billy had come up from fishing and were awaiting her. Harry had remained on the lake and contented himself with a sandwich, feeling doubtful of being able to withstand the united efforts of his conscience and Floss if he came back to the house while so thoroughly aware of the claims of a certain French play upstairs.

Mr. Murray was a tall, stalwart young man, with pronounced features, and an habitually serious expression. Perhaps it was this expression of seriousness that had made Mrs. Carr think him so suitable for sober Floss, and which caused him to impress new acquaintances as a thoroughly dependable and sedate young man. He had very dark, melancholy eyes, which had gained him much feminine admiration, a brown moustache, hiding a certain weakness about his mouth, and a very grave, deliberate manner. Murray was always self-possessed, and very seldom moved from his outward calm.

Floss greeted him cheerfully; she was too well accustomed to Mrs. Carr to have her serenity at all

disturbed by the remembrance of that lady's words; such matrimonial projects on her behalf always annoyed her a little at the time, but were easily forgotten.

Billy was in a great hurry to get his lunch over and go out again to the lake, but Murray, besides being naturally deliberate and not quite so keen about fishing, seemed on this day very well content to remain where he was, and all Billy's efforts to hasten him proved vain.

That youth could at length restrain his impatience no longer on seeing his companion serenely proceed to help himself to some biscuits, talking tranquilly to Floss meanwhile.

"Look here, Murray," he said, "aren't you nearly ready? Don't let us spend the whole afternoon here."

"Don't let me keep you," said Murray, who in truth felt he could spare Billy very well, "I sha'n't go down yet; I intend going to help Miss Egerton feed the chickens first, if she will let me—and in fact I am in no hurry."

"Oh, don't bother with Floss," said Billy, with the roughness which made his sister often blush for him, "don't imagine there's any need for stopping out of politeness; you had much better come on."

"No, thank you," said Murray, serenely. And he remained, rather perturbing Floss by doing so.

"You had much better go with Billy," she said, as that youth departed huffily; "feeding chickens is certainly not much in your line—it will only bore you."

"Haven't you known me long enough by this time,

to be aware that I never do anything I don't like, Miss Egerton?" he answered lightly; "I must have concealed my failings better than I imagined!"

"Come by all means, then," said Floss; "I will fetch Dicky to help us, and then we can start."

Now there had been a time when Murray had considered Dicky as an unobjectionable third during his *tête-à-têtes* with Floss, but he had very soon been disabused of this idea. There was an excellent understanding between them at present; Murray presented Dicky with numerous boxes of chocolate, in return for which that unpleasantly sharp child was well aware that his absence was expected.

Floss, knowing his partiality for the society of his elders, was sometimes a little surprised, but Dicky kept his counsel and ate his chocolates.

That very morning Murray had taken the trouble of going round by Delagherty on his way from barracks to secure Dicky a fresh supply, and he did feel it would be a little hard if he was to have that small person's society forced upon him after all.

"I *was* beginning to entertain a faint hope that for once I should have you without a child as well," he said, in a somewhat injured tone; "don't you think," persuasively, "that Dicky is very happy wherever he may be?"

It was pretty evident that the young man was fairly at home at the Elms, and also that he was well accustomed to have what he wanted. Floss yielded, guiltily conscious of satisfaction; and having gained his point, Murray was very well content to lazily

saunter by her side to the yard, and even to exert himself to be useful when there.

The fishing on the lake was not particularly good, and on the whole amusement at Delagherty was not of the most exciting description.

Murray missed the life of a large barracks; Captain Atterly, who commanded his detachment, was not a congenial spirit, and the other subaltern, Shaw, was newly joined, and both young and green.

The election, the reason for their presence at Delagherty, was over, yet nothing had been heard of their departure. It was dull, but Murray was willing to make the best of things. So after a morning spent at the club, of which he was an honorary member, or lounging about the shops with any of the Delagherty girls he happened to come across, he was glad enough to find a pleasant way of passing his afternoons.

Floss had at first roused his interest by her absolute indifference to his society; she was not accustomed to look upon Harry's friends as likely to contribute in any way to her amusement, and she had not the slightest desire that they should.

But Murray was of a different opinion. He was a young man much in the habit of devoting himself to one girl at a time, and very seldom without a special friend of the fair sex. He had caused his regiment much anxiety at times by the engrossing nature of his temporary devotions; they strongly objected to the marriage of their officers, and felt that Murray, in particular, would be an incalculable loss to the mess. Latterly their fear had been somewhat allayed for

a time by a strong flirtation with Captain Atterly's wife, into which he had thrown himself after his usual headlong fashion; she was a faded but still pretty woman, very willing to have a man as much the fashion and as well versed in the art of warm flirtation as Mr. Murray attach himself to her as *cavaliere servante*, and they went about everywhere together, and succeeded in getting themselves considerably talked about through Dublin.

But Captain Atterly had not brought his wife with him to Delagherty when they were ordered there on detachment duty, and Murray's feeling for her was not of a nature to survive separation. The Delagherty girls in general had a reputation for fastness which he soon found did not in any way belie them, and though being met more than half-way saved him trouble, still there was a deplorable want of excitement about it.

Floss's attraction at first, perhaps, consisted merely in her indifference, but, as he found himself gradually overcoming this, her society grew more and more pleasant to him.

There was a boyishness about Murray still, in spite of his twenty-six years and the extent to which he had knocked about the world, and he yielded to Floss's growing attraction for him heedlessly as usual. He was always more than half in love with the girl whom he happened, for the time being, to admire, and there was an undercurrent of warmth in his manner to Floss which was pleasant to her in an unrecognised way.

So he was very well content to delay his fishing

and saunter about with her; so well content, indeed, that when there was no longer any excuse for lingering with the chickens, he begged to be allowed to walk as far as the garden with Floss, who was contemplating a busy afternoon there.

"I will take my rod and go on from there," he said, "and I can carry a hoe or a spade, or whatever you want."

And even when they reached the garden he did not seem very much inclined to go further.

"I must really have a rest," he said, in his slow, grave tones; "you see, Miss Egerton, I am not accustomed to feeding chickens, and it is rather hard work. And you must sit down too, or your industry will reproach me."

There was a garden chair close to the flower-bed where Floss intended to commence her labours, and though she laughed, she yielded to his plea for idleness.

"But perhaps you will be cold. I am equal to fetching you a shawl, if you will let me?" said Murray.

The anxious solicitude in his voice was very pleasant to Floss, though it is to be feared this young man would have spoken quite as solicitously to anything in the shape of a girl. But she was not accustomed to being taken care of or considered. At the Elms it was always supposed to be Floss who had no particular wishes—who did not mind having her plans upset, or some extra trouble imposed upon her—and she found it very pleasant to be treated with such deference and consideration.

She only laughed and said: "Nonsense! cold in July!" but she was pleased all the same.

Murray laid down his rod and established himself on the grass at her feet, a favourite position of his.

"This has been the best day I have had for a long time," he said in a low voice; "I never seem to see much of you now, somehow. Can I stay for dinner to-night, and have a real good talk with you after?"

"Yes, do," said Floss, and then became a little thoughtful.

Murray looked at her, and flattered himself that he was the cause of her grave silence—and so he was, though scarcely in the way he fancied. Floss was just then anxiously considering the possibilities of dinner with regard to the young man, and more sentimental feelings were for the time shut out by such vulgar and commonplace cares. From motives of economy the Egertons contented themselves with high tea when alone, and Floss doubted the practicability of raising a dinner on such short notice, while she knew her father would be annoyed if it did not come up to his ideas of what was due to a guest. The first thing to be done was evidently to get rid of Murray for the present, and return to the house to see what could be managed, and Floss awoke from her abstraction to find Murray's eyes fixed upon her with an expression that made her flush.

"I really can't idle any longer, Mr. Murray," she said; "you must go now, and we can talk in the evening if you have anything to say."

"How unkind of you!" said Murray, tenderly; "why are you in such a hurry? You would not be

if you felt as I do. Let us stay here for a little while longer; it is not often one can call oneself almost perfectly happy, so let me make the most of it."

"Your ideas of perfect happiness are humble, Mr. Murray!" said Floss, laughing.

"I did not say *perfect* happiness," said Murray, in a low voice; "I said 'almost' because I wanted—because I want—to ask you to make it perfect."

Floss started and grew scarlet; in a moment a thousand thoughts and hopes and fears rushed through her head, his words — his tone — alike bewildering her.

After all, the pause was a very slight one. He went on:

"If you would allow me to smoke, Miss Egerton, I should reach the utmost summit of felicity."

"Oh, smoke by all means," said Floss, hastily. She felt bitter shame for the vague thoughts which had for a moment filled her head, mingled with a worse fear that Murray might perhaps have guessed the meaning she had taken from his words.

"Whether you idle or not, I at least must work," she said.

And she sprang up, hoe in hand, proceeding energetically to attack the weeds, which were endeavouring to make way among her roses. She hoped her industry would have the effect of driving Mr. Murray away, and leaving her free to go back to the house to devote herself to the cares of his dinner, but, on the contrary, the young man seemed more than content to lie and watch her.

"Do you think me very lazy?" he said. "But you

can't imagine how comfortable I am, or what a luxury it is to do nothing, and see other people work."

"If I tried to imagine it," said Floss, "I am afraid the garden would suffer."

"And other things too," said Murray. "You mustn't mind my looking at you, Miss Egerton; I am fond of observing you as a model of industry, and in faint hopes that your example may have some effect upon me. Still, I acknowledge that this last week I should have preferred a little—well, a little more *repose* of manner."

"You know I have been specially busy," said Floss, almost apologetically. "I want to have as free a week as possible after Thursday, when Sylvia Alison comes home."

"And who is Sylvia Alison?" said Murray, lazily. "Anything to the Alison who lives next door?"

"His daughter," said Floss; "she has been at school in France."

"It will be pleasant for you to have a girl so near," said Murray. "I suppose you are great friends?"

"Great friends?" returned Floss, meditatively, stooping to pull up a particularly resisting weed. "Yes—I am very fond of Sylvia, and it is nice to have her always over here, as she is when she is at home."

"You mustn't let her cut me out," said Murray, carelessly; and then, as he saw how Floss flushed and grew grave at his half-joking words, the temptation to speak more earnestly became irresistible—at least to Murray.

He raised himself upon his elbow, and let his pipe go out unheeded.

"You won't let her being at home interfere with our talks together, will you?" he said earnestly; "we get few enough as it is—at least *I* think so. You won't let them be interfered with?"

Murray's slow, deliberate tones were very earnest—the more so, that for the time being he entirely meant what he said, and felt as if the loss of his confidential moments with Floss would give him some pain.

"If you care to talk to me—" said Floss, with one of her ready blushes; "but I am sure you will like Sylvia."

"If she is a pretty girl I have no doubt I shall," said Murray, proceeding to relight his pipe; "I have often told you of my weakness in that direction. Be a girl decently good-looking and able to speak, I fall in love with her directly."

"I wish you would not call it falling in love," said Floss, in a low voice; "that must be—should be—the most solemn thing in one's life, and this that you speak of—"

"You are quite right," said Murray; "I only called it so, because I could think of no other word. I know very well it is nothing more than an attraction that I can't resist."

"That you—*can't?*" said Floss, with hesitation.

"You are quite right to blame me, Miss Egerton," said Murray, softly, trying to see her face. "I know it is wrong, but please remember before you judge me that all my life I have knocked about the world by myself; I might have been a better fellow if I could have remembered either father or mother."

"*I* judge you!" said Floss, starting.

"Don't you consider it some small excuse for my being a selfish, self-indulgent sort of fellow, that I have never had anybody in the world to think of, or," in a low voice, "to think of me?"

"I am so sorry," said Floss, simply. She was touched so far as to forget her shyness, and for a moment her flushed, sympathetic face made Murray lose his head.

"But such a feeling is as different as possible from what I feel to you—" he began with hasty warmth; "I think you—"

Was it Murray's good or bad angel which interfered just then?

The interference was in an insignificant shape—only a spark which fell on his hand from the pipe he was holding, but it gave him a sharp momentary prick, and in his half-involuntary pause he had time to check himself. He ended his sentence in a totally different tone.

"Till I met you," he said, "I could not have believed in the possibility of my spending so many days with any girl without flirting with her; and strange to say, I like it."

If this was not flirtation it was something very near it, he reflected with some amusement even as he spoke, but Floss received the remark in all good faith.

She took up her hoe again, unconsciously recognising the change in his manner, and he let himself fall back into his former easy position. She remembered his dinner too, which had been forgotten for the moment, and the necessity of at once attending to it.

Murray seemed as if he might be content to lie

there and watch her the whole afternoon, but this would never do. Floss, however, knew of a very good way of securing his departure.

"Mr. Murray," she said politely, but not without a feeling of mischievous satisfaction, "I am afraid I must ask you to go to the garden-house and fetch me a couple of watering-cans."

The errand certainly did not please Murray, but he concealed his feelings heroically, and showed no sign of annoyance.

"Certainly," he said, rising with an alacrity that made Floss's conscience smite her for her cruelty; "I am being far too lazy."

"You will have to go round by the tank and fill them there, I am afraid," she said apologetically, and Murray concealed his feelings under a cheerful "All right."

But when he came back he allowed himself to run no danger of further errands. As Floss had expected, he remembered his fishing now, and was ready enough to depart. She found herself free to attend to his dinner at last, and to enter into a hot discussion with Dicky, in which she knew her defeat to be a foregone conclusion, on the subject of that small boy's appearance thereat.

CHAPTER III.

THE ALISONS.

HEATH COTTAGE was about ten minutes' walk from the Elms if one went through the plantation which separated them, and did not object to climbing a stile and fording a stream.

Floss Egerton might sigh over the contrast between the trimness on the Alisons' side of the hedge and the disorder on theirs, but in truth the grounds of Heath Cottage were by no means so pretty as those belonging to the Elms. Certainly they were as well kept as grounds could be—there was never an obtrusive weed, nor a blade of grass to be seen in the wrong place, but there was a want of the individuality which Floss's personal efforts bestowed on the other side.

There had never been anybody to disturb the general neatness; even in the days of Sylvia's childhood she had not been given to making herself or anything else untidy. Any escapades she *had* indulged in had been at the other side of the hedge, at the instigation of the Egerton boys. Left to herself, she had been much too thoughtful of her attire and careful of her small person to run any risks.

Mr. Alison had come to Delagherty more than twenty years ago, to enter into partnership with old Mr. Greene, a timber-merchant.

The old man had only then just begun to be acknowledged in Delagherty society, in consequence of his very pretty daughter, who would be very rich, too, some day. The Delagherty people abhorred business, and Mr. Greene was undeniably and rather obtrusively vulgar; but still, there were a good many impoverished scions of county families about, who could not afford to be too particular.

Mr. Alison was a very handsome, gentlemanly young man, though he did sell timber, also he was well off, so he, too, soon found himself accepted everywhere—not that he cared about it. But scarcely a year after his arrival he disappointed all hopes by very suitably falling in love with his partner's daughter. There were no possible objections to be made, except, indeed, those of people who had planned a different disposal of one or both, and who thought it very wrong that wealth should marry wealth.

Mr. Alison took Heath Cottage and married pretty, foolish little May Greene not six months after he had proposed. They were very happy for a time: Mrs. Alison was delighted to be asked about, and she was little more than a child in years.

It made no difference when Sylvia was born; she was delighted with her child as a new plaything, and always liked to have her prettily dressed, but beyond that the little girl was left to her nurse.

Mr. Alison had been willing to take his wife about at first, and even been pleased to do so, but now he

grew to object to her entire devotion to gaiety, and her indiscriminate friendships among the officers. He was severe, and she was giddy and wilful: she went her own way rebelliously, and he proudly left her alone.

Floss could remember pretty Mrs. Alison well, with her caressing ways and her blithe laugh. She never seemed to feel anything much—neither her husband's displeasure, nor the gossip which she could not fail to know she must arouse in a country town like Delagherty.

And meanwhile little Sylvia became more and more a miniature copy of her mother, and seemed quite as capable of making the best of things in her baby way. In these days the five years between them had been an utter barrier to anything like friendship between her and Floss; but in pity for the child's neglect, Mrs. Egerton often had her over to play with Harry and Billy. Sylvia would join in all their games, but it was never with the oblivion of sex and comradeship of most children. She never forgot for a moment that she was a little girl and that they were boys, and she coquetted with them, with a comical imitation of her mother's manner which often caused much amusement.

But there came a time when Sylvia's likeness to her mother made people sigh instead of smile. Floss could not remember much about it; she had a dim recollection of her mother speaking to her very gravely and telling her she must be very kind to little Sylvia now, and that she must never talk to her about her mother. She remembered a little wonder

and curiosity, suppressed by a child's instinctive feeling that this was a subject on which she must not ask questions, some surprise that Sylvia did not wear a black dress as the little Grimshaws had done when their father died—but that was all, and it was many years before she knew the truth.

She sometimes wondered if Sylvia, who had been upon the spot, had had a nearer conception of the misfortune that had come to her; it was strange, certainly, how seldom she mentioned her mother, and how little she seemed to miss her, but how could a child of seven years old have had any understanding of what had occurred?

Mrs. Alison faded very quickly out of people's memories at Delagherty. There was a terrible scandal at first when her elopement was known; it was even more than a nine days' wonder, for the heroine of the story had lived among them all her life, and the man she had gone off with, a good-looking, unsteady young fellow in the Artillery, was well known and popular in the neighbourhood.

But it died out after a time. Old Mr. Greene was dead, and Mr. Alison soon went about his business as usual, facing curiosity and interest with an unchanged face. As for little Sylvia, her father's indifference to her seemed to have changed into almost dislike, and she was more at the Elms than ever.

And for a time this was all very well; but later on, as she began to grow up, her devotion to "the boys" became a source of much anxiety to Floss's motherly soul. It would have been different if they had grown up together like brothers and sisters, as

they might very well have done, but this was not in Sylvia's nature. Floss was very fond of her through it all; there were few people, indeed, who could resist her bright, caressing ways; but she could not wish that one of her brothers should marry a girl whose mother had such a history, and who was so like that mother in all her ways.

Floss had felt herself like a hen with a brood of ducklings during Sylvia's last holidays. She could not possibly spend her whole time with the girl, and the latter, who had no duties or occupation of any kind, was always at the Elms, unless, indeed, the boys were over at Heath Cottage. Billy's openly expressed devotion did not make Floss very uneasy, as he was two years younger than Sylvia; neither did Harry's careless friendliness—he was always in love with somebody or other, and all that surprised his sister was that he had never as yet selected Sylvia as the object of his admiration. But George, who was full of fads and feelings, to whom Sylvia was most devoted of all, and who read her his poetry and considered himself aways secure of her admiration. Floss felt it a providence that he was with his regiment at present, though, as this was August, if he went on first leave the evil day was but little postponed. It was this fear that prevented her from wholly rejoicing in the prospect of Sylvia's return.

Mr. Alison was another person to whom his daughter's approaching arrival afforded by no means unmitigated satisfaction. He was a man who liked order and regularity, and looked upon girls in

general, and Sylvia in particular, as utterly subversive to anything of the kind. He liked his present life; his regular two-mile morning ride into Delagherty to his business, from which he as regularly returned every evening at five. A dreary enough existence, perhaps, for an active man of forty-five, but he did not find it so. His old housekeeper, Mrs. Kelly, knew all his "ways"—for he had already thoroughly established "ways" and many old bachelor-like habits—he liked to do exactly the same thing every day, and a day's hunting now and then or an occasional business journey were all the variety he had or desired.

Would Sylvia alter all this? Would she expect to be amused and taken about? Would she, perhaps, wish to press him into the service? No, to this he could not and would not yield; it would be too much; and yet he was aware it was not at all impossible that Sylvia would expect it.

And then, this anxious charge of his was a very pretty girl, and an heiress in a small way; she would require looking after, the more so as her mother's story would render her particularly liable to gossip. Mr. Alison most sincerely wished his daughter well married, but till then, would it be necessary for him to turn chaperon?

All those idle young officers would be hanging about the place, too; Mr. Alison had as great a prejudice against the army as Mr. Carr, with a more reasonable excuse for it. And then, what was perhaps the most distasteful part of it all to him, he could imagine how Sylvia's appearance in Dela-

gherty society would cause the old, half-forgotten scandal to be raked up and re-discussed.

And yet, though such were Mr. Alison's feelings while his daughter's coming was still in the future, on the day of her arrival he found himself yielding as usual to the charm of her manner.

She was so gay, so affectionate, so serenely certain of her welcome, that during their drive from the station he found his objections fading away. And when they arrived at home, she was so rejoiced to be there, so warm in her greeting to old Mrs. Kelly, the housekeeper, and so much of a child still, that the future seemed less alarming. And yet she was prettier than ever, even ruffled and untidy after her journey. She had been pretty a year ago, at the most awkward of ages, which had yet never been awkward with Sylvia, but now her father thought, as he looked at her, that she was almost sweeter to look upon than her mother had ever been.

She was rather small and slight, with a figure scarcely fully formed as yet; she had large, soft, violet eyes, a straight, short little nose, and full red lips. And perhaps her greatest beauty was a cloud of soft reddish-brown hair, which never would lie straight, but waved and twisted all over head. She caught her father's glance of mingled pain and admiration as she stood in the hall, trying to smooth those troublesome curls with her fingers, and smiled in response. Admiration was very dear to her, no matter from whom.

"Well, governor," she said brightly, "are you as glad to have me at home as I am to come?"

And Mr. Alison felt very guilty.

Sylvia went on briskly: "Fancy, it is a year since I was at home last, and nothing seems a bit changed. Do you think I am changed, Gov., and is it for the better or the worse? Would you like to have a good look at me?—though I would not let any one else see me after a journey. And I am awfully hungry—Mrs. Kelly, you have surely got something for me to eat?"

CHAPTER IV.

AN UNCEREMONIOUS INTRODUCTION.

"I THINK Miss Egerton is in the garden, sir. Will you wait till I go and see?"

Murray had not been at the Elms for three days, which had become quite an unusual occurrence, and he did not want to go away without seeing Floss. He hesitated for a moment, and wondered if he might consider himself sufficiently at home to go to the garden and look for her himself, but finally decided against it.

"I think I will wait," he said, "if you will kindly tell Miss Egerton or Mr. Harry."

Which the maid, who was deeply interested in Floss and Murray, willingly agreed to do.

"They will be coming in to tea anyway in a few minutes, sir," she added reassuringly, and then proceeded to show him into the drawing-room.

"Miss Alison is in here, sir; you won't mind?" she said, and had Murray wished to object he could scarcely have done so, as the door was already open. There was a slight hesitation in Maria's mind as to whether she ought to announce Murray when none of the "family" were present, and having no precedent

to go upon, she finally decided in the negative, and departed, leaving him to introduce himself.

He had forgotten even the fact of Miss Alison's existence till he heard her name, but Murray had never any objection to a *tête-à-tête* with a pretty girl, and a glance showed him that his present companion was very pretty. She was lying back lazily in an easy-chair, and started and coloured a little when the young man entered, but she was no more given to embarrassment than he was.

Murray bowed slightly, and there was a moment's pause; he was by no means shy, but he thought it better to leave Miss Alison to speak if she wished —besides being naturally a deliberate person, who did nothing in a hurry.

Sylvia was not at all given to silence.

"As there is no one to introduce us," she said briskly, "we shall either have to introduce ourselves or sit silent: which do you prefer?"

"It is for you to decide," said Murray, his slow, grave voice sounding even more deliberate than usual, after Sylvia's clear, rather loud tones.

"Then I decide against silence," she said; "I am not very fond of it at any time. I will begin by informing you that I am Sylvia Alison."

"I have often heard of you," said Harry, with a glance of admiration which by no means escaped Miss Sylvia.

"Have you? So far as I know, you have the advantage of me."

"Still, I did not hear everything," he went on softly. He knew how to stare without being

rude, and he was making the very best use of his time.

"You might respond to my self-introduction by telling me your name," pursued Sylvia; "I am not good at beating about the bush, or I would have tried to find out politely."

"My name is Arthur Murray, very much at your service, but I am afraid I can't flatter myself that *you* have heard of *me?*"

He looked at her as he spoke, a little curious to see if Floss had mentioned him.

"Don't let it hurt your feelings if I confess that I haven't," said Sylvia, smiling to him; "it only proves that your fame has not reached France, for as I only came home yesterday, I know nothing about Delagherty celebrities. I suppose you are one of the officers? I think I know most of the other Delagherty men—they are not so numerous."

"The 73rd is my regiment," said Murray; "I suppose you know there is a detachment of us stationed here since the riots?"

"We never have anything but detachments," said Sylvia, sadly; "I hope you are going to give something while you are here? When there are only a line and an artillery detachment here, they say they are too few to have anything. Won't you give a dance? I want to go to a dance so badly, now that I am grown up at last."

"I am sure nothing would give us greater pleasure if our stay here was not so uncertain," returned Murray; "but you see, we may be ordered away at any moment. Shaw—Mr. Shaw—was talking of it."

"I am sure I shall like Mr. Shaw," said Sylvia, approvingly; "I am sure—oh! there is Harry's voice!"

And Sylvia unceremoniously ran out of the room, leaving Murray the deliberate considerably astonished at the briskness of her movements. She was in again with Floss and Harry before he had had even time to *think* whether he should follow her or not. The latter was a tall, fair, freckled youth of nineteen or twenty, with a face that would have been very plain, but for its expression of light-hearted good-humour. Nothing ever put out Harry, or prevented him from taking the sunniest view of things.

He was as frankly delighted to see Sylvia as she was to see him.

"Why didn't you come and see me yesterday with Floss?" she said reproachfully, scarcely leaving him time to shake hands with Murray.

"I thought I'd leave you time to rest, and look forward to the felicity of meeting me, a little longer," returned Harry, serenely. "How are you, Murray? It's an age since you were over. Let's have a look at you, Sylvia: I must say you're no end improved—you used to be all arms and legs."

"Harry!" remonstrated Sylvia, getting quite pink, but not displeased.

"Well, you needn't mind, Miss Vanity; I don't say you are now. Joking aside, if you go on like this you will soon be positively pretty!"

"My dear Harry, pray restrain your too flattering admiration and fetch the tea-table. I hear Maria at the door and a suggestive rattle of cups," said Floss, laughing.

Murray did not laugh; he considered that Miss Alison was allowing Harry to treat her with much too great familiarity—a familiarity which no amount of friendship could justify.

But Sylvia did not mind at all, and appeared to have ceased to take any interest in her new acquaintance. She settled herself down beside Floss when tea came in, but continued to devote all her attention to Harry.

"Am I to see you all in detachments?" she said; "where's my own familiar Billy? Why hasn't *he* been to see me? I felt that even more than your defection, Harry."

"Am I not only too well aware of your sad perversion of taste? You needn't flaunt it in my face. I suppose Billy thinks you had better have *two* days to look forward to the felicity of seeing *him*."

"I think he took a shy fit yesterday, Sylvia dear," said Floss, "and he had arranged to go down to Belderry with some friends to-day, but I know he is very anxious to see you. Shall I give you some more tea, Mr. Murray?"

"Tell him I am longing to see him. I shall really have to reverse the proper order of things, and come to pay *him* a visit!"

"Well, Billy is growing up," said Harry, reflectively. 'By the way, am I to consider this as a call on me?"

"You may consider it whatever you like," said Sylvia, serenely. "Now, Harry dear, you have had quite as much tea as is good for you, so come and sit in the window, and we will have a real good talk. At

present Mr. Murray and Floss have not a chance to hear their own voices."

And in the window they remained during the rest of Murray's visit, which was not a long one, as he was engaged to dine at the Grimshaws'. He talked to Floss, and looked at Sylvia, and Floss wondered if it was her imagination that he was not quite so—"friendly," she called it—as usual.

Harry and Sylvia came out of their window-seat to say good-bye to him when he rose to go.

"This is nothing of a visit, Murray," said Harry, with his usual frank friendliness; "what has become of you lately? Have you been playing polo?"

"I was at the field one day, but not playing," said Murray. "I thought"—speaking to Harry, and looking at Floss—"you might have been there; and yesterday I had two engagements in the shape of duty, and a picnic."

"Well, come over for lunch to-morrow, and we'll have a day's fishing," said Harry.

"I shall be very glad," said Murray—"if you won't think I am becoming an awful nuisance, Miss Egerton."

And he smiled at Floss, very secure that she would not.

And then they all came out on to the steps to see him off, and he took a careless leave of Sylvia and a warm one of Floss. But still, it was of Sylvia's piquant little face and violet eyes that he thought as he walked back to barracks.

And she looked after him till he was out of sight, and then turned to Floss with a laugh in her eyes.

"Ah, Floss," she said, "Mr. Murray seems to be a great friend of yours."

"I like him very much," said Floss, steadily, though she flushed a little.

"And he likes you very much. Well, I think he is extremely nice, and you must put in a good word for me with him, Floss."

"You silly child! You had better go home now, unless you will stay for dinner?"

"No, not to-night, thanks. Come over for coffee in the evening, won't you? Harry, you will, at any rate?"

"All right; I'll come over," said he, briskly.

"Now, Harry dear," Floss interposed, anxiously, "what about your exam.? You know you have not read all day."

"Oh, plague take the thing! I can't read at home," said Harry, with a groan.

"Harry cramming for an exam.!" exclaimed Sylvia, laughing. "That sounds too absurd. Harry dear, when is your time for working, and I will come over and help you?"

"Oh, any time," responded Harry, nonchalantly.

"Or no time!" remarked Floss. "I most sincerely beg, Sylvia, that you will not come over to Harry's assistance. It is very kind of you, no doubt, but I can't feel confident of your having a good effect."

"You *are* disagreeable, Floss, but I shall be over to-morrow morning all the same, if I can find nothing better to do. Well, good-night; tell my Billy to

come and see me this evening, at any rate, if Harry isn't to be permitted."

"Never mind, Sylvia! After I have passed I shall do what I like!"

And Floss sighed at his gay, confident words.

CHAPTER V.

SYLVIA HELPS HARRY TO CRAM.

"WHERE'S Harry?"

"Why, Sylvia, you're an early visitor! Harry is in the nursery, I expect."

Floss was in the middle of a pile of clothes, which covered the floor around her, and which she was busily counting, preparatory to consigning them to the wash.

"I can't talk to you just now, Sylvia. How many handkerchiefs did you say, Jane?"

"I don't want to talk to you in the least; it is Harry I want to see." And Sylvia sped away upstairs, heedless of Floss's remonstrance against disturbing Harry.

Saying that he was in the nursery conveys very false ideas. There was no nursery at the Elms now—a man of the world like Dicky certainly required none—but the room which had formerly been used for that purpose was made over entirely to the boys; and here Floss restrained her tidying impulses, and allowed any amount of litter.

Sylvia found Harry extremely busy filling cartridges, and studying a mathematical-looking book

which lay open on the table before him. This combination of occupations was not particularly likely to conduce to the perfection of either, but Harry was relieving his conscience, and considered himself to be nobly keeping to his resolution of an hour's work every morning, while at the same time he forwarded preparations for the approaching 12th.

He greeted Sylvia gladly as an excuse for total idleness.

"Where did you spring from at this early hour?" he said.

"Well, I had nothing particular to do," replied Sylvia, briskly. "And I've an invite from my Billy to go with him and carry his fishing-basket."

"You and Billy will make a match of it some day," said Harry, with a laugh; "he's devotion personified."

"It's been quite a long attachment on both sides," replied Sylvia. "Meanwhile, till Billy is ready for my services, do let me coach you, Harry."

"Well, if you feel equal to this—?" and Harry pushed his book towards her.

"Now, I am quite serious," replied Sylvia, "and I was thinking of your French; it used to be very doubtful."

"I am afraid it is still. However, I'll work it up all right for the exam."

"Do you expect to pass, Harry?"

"Oh, I must. I'll scrape through somehow. I intend putting on a spurt next week."

Harry was of a hopeful disposition, and had been intending to put on a spurt next week for a good many weeks.

"I shall have to go and live in London afterwards," he said, "all by myself, which won't be very lively. You'd better come and keep house for me, Sylvia."

"Nothing I should like better," she returned. "Isn't it a pity that it wouldn't be a proper arrangement? What fun we could have!"

"Not unless I married you, I suppose," said Harry, filling the last cartridge as he spoke.

"Or unless I married Billy; then I should be your sister-in-law."

But Harry made no answer to this, and proceeded to prepare his fishing-rod in silence, looking wonderfully grave and thoughtful.

He did not speak again till he was ready to start.

"Well, Sylvia, I'm off: are you coming?" said he.

"Not without my Billy. He's kept me waiting a considerable time, but, unless my hopes deceive me, I hear his manly footsteps approaching!"

And then the long-expected youth did at last put in his appearance, greeting Sylvia with a fine blush.

Billy's rough words and little rudenesses were entirely kept for the delectation of his family; with Sylvia he could be sweet enough.

"I am awfully sorry to have been so long, Sylvia," he said, "but I have been hunting everywhere for my fly-book. Dicky must have got at it when I was at school."

"Better late than never, my Billy; I was just refusing to go with Harry till you came."

"Of course you were; you agreed to come with *me*, not Harry," said Billy, tenderly.

"All right; I'm not going to intrude myself where

I'm not wanted," said Harry, solemnly; and he departed, bestowing a distinct wink on Sylvia as he passed.

"You *are* coming only with me, Sylvia dear, aren't you?" said Billy, anxiously.

He was, as a rule, blissfully unconscious that Sylvia did not quite estimate his attentions at their due value, and in truth she did not wholly despise even Billy's admiration. She was not content without liking and admiration from everybody, and she found such open worship very pleasant even from a boy.

She was flattered as well as amused when he shyly presented her with a rose he had gathered for her, and still more shyly requested her to give him a kiss for it. She declined the kiss, but it is a question whether Billy was not as much gratified by being told that he was too old for such things as he would have been had she granted his request.

Sylvia spent that day on the lake with the boys, and of course she could not be expected to go away when Murray appeared. Equally of course, as he was the stranger it was only natural that she should devote the greater part of her attention to him. And then, later on, it was only to be expected that he should see her home, when it was quite on his way to barracks, and that they should linger a little at Heath Cottage gate before they parted.

At any rate, by the time they had shaken hands and said good-bye, Sylvia found that she had barely long enough to get ready for dinner, and she knew Mr. Alison's dislike of unpunctuality. However, she did just manage to be downstairs by the time the gong

went, and during dinner she devoted herself to being agreeable to her father, which, it must be acknowledged was by no means unusual to Miss Sylvia. She was quite willing to take a little trouble to amuse her father, and she did her best to think of subjects that she considered likely to interest him. This was during the progress of dinner, but when dessert made its appearance, Sylvia bethought her of a little business of her own which she was desirous of transacting.

"Gov. dear," she said in her sweetest tones, when the butler had retired, and they were left alone, "must I catch my own eye and retire, or may I stay with you if I am very good?"

"Of course I shall be very glad if you will stay with me, my dear," responded Mr. Alison, politely.

"Then you shall turn round to the fire, and I will fetch you your cigarettes; or if you like the vulgar and low, as there is no one else but me here, I will even let you have a pipe," said Sylvia, suavely.

She was aware that she looked very pretty in her plain white frock and blue ribbons, and felt it to be rather a pity that her attractions should all be wasted on a man who appeared to appreciate them as little as her father. But there was perhaps more appreciation than she was aware of in his dark eyes, as he watched her flit about the room, attending to his wants.

Finally she came and settled down beside him.

"Gov.," she said, after a short pause, "don't you think you ought to call at barracks?"

Mr. Alison started and frowned: he had had a premonition of this even before Sylvia's return.

"I don't see the slightest necessity for it," he said. "I called on Captain Hallam after I met him at the club, and I haven't the smallest desire to know any of the others."

"I dare say not," said Sylvia, with unruffled serenity, "but then you see, Gov., such things have to be done sometimes."

"I am sorry if you wish it, Sylvia," said Mr. Alison in what he meant for resolute tones, "but I really have no wish to have a lot of young men fooling about the place, and I haven't the least intention of calling at barracks."

"Oh, very well, Gov.," said Sylvia, meekly; "of course it is just as you like, only it is rather unpleasant for me."

"Unpleasant for you! Nonsense! What on earth makes you so anxious to know three or four silly young men?"

"It is not that?" said Sylvia, reproachfully, "but don't you see, Gov., wherever I go, even to the Egertons, I am sure to meet some of the officers. It is not that I want them here, but you see, it makes it awkward for me when you have not called."

"I don't see it at all."

"Besides, I thought you would think it right to know something about my friends, and to look after me a little," pursued Sylvia, sweetly. "And then you see, Governor," she added, caressingly, "I am rather proud of my father, and I like my friends to know him."

She laid her hand upon his knee, and looked innocently up at him.

"You little monkey!" he said, half-laughing, "you are not going to flatter anything out of me!"

"It is just as you think right," said Sylvia, meekly.

"I suppose it is this new detachment, the 73rd, that you want me to call upon?" he said.

Perhaps after all Sylvia might be right; possibly he ought to know something of her friends.

"Mr. Murray is such a friend of the Egertons."

"What, the grave young fellow with a big nose?"

"What a flattering description, Gov.," said Sylvia, laughing; "but to tell the truth, he is such a great friend—of Floss'—that I should like him to come here."

"What do you want him here for? He had much better go to the Egertons if that is the case. Not that I've any objection to him. I have played pool with him, and he seemed pleasant enough."

"I should like Floss to meet him here, Gov. dear. You will call, won't you?"

"Well, I'll see about it. But mind, if I do, I decline to have half the barracks putting in their spare time hanging about the place. Of course if you mean that Mr. Murray cares for Floss Egerton, it is different."

And then Sylvia knew that her point was gained.

CHAPTER VI.

SYLVIA'S DINNER-DRESS.

"RUN into the next room, Dicky, and see who has driven up. I do hope it is not a visitor, just when I am so busy."

And Floss sighed, and returned to the task of inspecting Billy's clothes, to see if they could by any possibility be made to last over his next term at school.

Dicky was delighted with any errand during lesson-time, though on other occasions rather given to grumble. He ran off, spelling-book in hand, and returned in a few minutes.

"It is Sylvia, Floss," he said; "she is driving her ponies, and she says you must come this very instant."

"Tell her I can't," said Floss, and Dicky again vanished, for an equally brief space of time.

"She says you must speak to her at any rate," he said on his second return, in tones which were jubilant from the prospect of a longer release.

"Well, I suppose I must go," said Floss, unwillingly; "sit still, and learn down to 'disgrace,' till I come back."

But Dicky saw fit to disregard this command, and followed Floss downstairs at a discreet distance.

Sylvia was in her phaeton, looking extremely pretty and dainty, in a very simple blue dress and sailor hat. Simple as her attire looked, however, she had brought it from Paris, and it formed one of the items in a bill over which her father had whistled, half in dismay, half in amusement, at the results of his daughter's first emancipated shopping.

"Now, Floss," she said briskly, "I have got to go into Delagherty, and you must come with me."

"Sylvia, it is quite impossible!" said Floss; "I am busy with Billy's clothes."

"Billy's clothes! nonsense! Why he doesn't go back to school till the 8th of September! *My* business is much more urgent. You know we dine at the Carrs' to-morrow, and they have never sent my dress from Lees'. Just think, Floss, my very first dinner-dress! You *must* take an interest in that."

"Well, why can't you go in by yourself, or wait till the afternoon?"

"You know the Gov. hates my going in to Delagherty by myself, and besides, I want you to help to decide about my sash. There, Floss dear, do be sweet, and come with me. We will lunch in town, and be back early in the afternoon."

"But I am really very busy, and besides—you will have to wait till I change my dress, you know."

And Floss looked doubtfully at her well-worn grey cotton gown.

"Nonsense, you look ever so nice, and the ponies won't stand. You are the dearest, sweetest most obliging girl, Floss! Just put on your hat and gloves, and you will be fit for anything."

Floss retreated to obey, unwillingly enough, and Sylvia lay back in the phaeton, serenely flicking the flies off the ponies harness' with her whip.

"Take me, Sylvia!" pleaded Dicky, climbing into the phaeton beside her.

"Take you, indeed!" said Sylvia, with whom the small boy was no favourite; "run away to your lessons, Dicky, and don't be tiresome."

"I can't do my lessons when Floss is away," persisted Dicky. "Do take me, Sylvia."

"You'll fall out and be killed if the phaeton moves; and see how Brownie is fidgeting. A nice figure you would be to go into Delagherty—just look at the ink down the front of your coat!"

Dicky surveyed his shabby jacket ruefully.

"I could put on my ulster?" he suggested.

"Don't bother any more," said Sylvia, sweet but unyielding. "See, here is Floss; you had better get down before she sees how you have inked yourself."

And Dicky thought it most prudent to follow this advice and return to the ground, muttering something in a grumbling tone, of which only the words "Mr. Murray" and "chocolate" were distinguishable.

"Now, Floss, are you ready?" said Sylvia, briskly.

"Yes, I think so.—Dicky, run in and finish your spelling like a good boy, and then go out to the twins in the garden. And see, here are the keys; be careful of them, and give them to Harry at lunch-time, if papa is not in."

And then Sylvia drove off, giving no time for further directions, and leaving Dicky standing, a small, sturdy figure, all by himself.

Floss was able to enjoy the drive, in spite of her annoyance at the interruption, and her consciousness that it would necessitate a busy afternoon; but it was delicious to drive along in the sunshine, and a pleasure she did not enjoy very often now, for, except for the Shetland pony and cart, which drew the twins to school every day, the Egertons' stables had been empty for three years.

And then Sylvia, in her sweetest and brightest of humours, was a very pleasant companion. Floss was quite sorry when they got to Delagherty.

"We had better drive to the stables and put up at once," said Sylvia; "and then we can go to Lees', and lunch at Weldon's at half-past one."

"I don't see that we need go to Weldon's," remonstrated Floss. "There are always a lot of men about there, especially about half-past one. A bun would do very well till we get home."

"Perhaps it might content you, but I assure you I haven't the least inclination to lunch on a bun!" said Sylvia, laughing. "What harm will the men do us? Weldon's is the only place in Delagherty where one can get a decent lunch."

"Very well," said Floss; "but come on now, and let us go to Lees'."

"Don't hurry along so fast," remonstrated Sylvia; "it is awfully hot; and besides, I have not been in Delagherty since I came home, and I want to see if there are any changes in the shop windows."

"It is very hot, but I did not think I was walking fast," said Floss.

Sylvia was looking at the wrong side for shop windows.

"Do you see Charley Morris in his office, Floss? I wonder does he see us, and will he come down if he does?"

"Don't stare up at the window like that," said Floss, sharply; "I am sure you haven't the least wish for Charley Morris to come down—at least, I know *I* haven't."

"And there's Mr. Dent coming—oh, he has gone into the post-office. Floss, I really want some stamps badly."

And before she had time to remonstrate, Floss found herself, much against her will, in the post-office, shaking hands with Mr. Dent.

And even when this little episode was over, Sylvia still insisted on lingering on her way to Lees'.

"There's young Johnstone on the other side of the street—oh, Floss, who was that good-looking man who bowed to you just now?"

"Only Mr. Kennedy, of the Artillery," said Floss, impatiently; "*do* come on, Sylvia."

"Why did you not stop him and introduce him to me?"

"My dear Sylvia! Partly because I hadn't the least wish to, and partly because I know him so slightly that he would have been very much astonished if I had," said Floss. "Here we are at Lee's at last."

"Let us hurry, and perhaps we may have time to go down to the Gov.'s office before lunch," suggested Sylvia.

"Down among the quays? Unless you want to see Mr. Alison particularly, I think we had much

better not go there either before or after lunch," said Floss.

"Not go down to my own father's office!" exclaimed Sylvia. "Why, the Grimshaws are always going to their cousin's office, and that is on the quays too."

"There won't be time, at any rate," said Floss; "and really, Sylvia, if you have come with the intention of 'doing' Delagherty in this fashion, you had much better get the Grimshaws to go with you, for I won't."

Floss's words and tone were very unlike her usual way of speaking, but she was vexed and annoyed with Sylvia, and still hot all over from the consciousness of their hurried pursuit of Mr. Dent into the post-office.

Sylvia looked at her in surprise. "Oh, well, if you are going to be cross!" she said, shrugging her shoulders; and a few minutes later she was entirely engrossed with her dress.

It was indeed a very important matter, that first really grown-up evening dress, and Sylvia was only aroused from the consideration thereof by becoming aware that it was nearly half-past one.

"We must go and have lunch, and then I can come back and choose the lace and ribbons afterwards," she said at once.

Weldon's was full, as Floss had expected, but Sylvia would not hear of the ladies' room.

"The dullest place!" she said, and Floss could not but agree with her.

"We will choose a retired corner, and then we will

be all right," said Sylvia, and they did manage to secure a table in the recess of a window.

"What will you have, Floss? Only coffee and buns? Oh, I will have—let me see—some chicken and lemonade. Do you see any one you know?"

"Nobody but Graham, the shop-boy from Irwin's. I suppose you would not care to be introduced to him?"

"Now, Floss dear, don't be satirical! It doesn't suit you at all," said Sylvia, serenely. "I didn't know Weldon's was patronised by—oh, there is Mr. Murray!"

Sylvia half sprang from her seat, her eyes sparkling with excitement, and Floss became all at once aware of an odd, pained feeling in the suspicion, almost amounting to certainty, that the young man's appearance was not due to accident. None of the officers came to Weldon's to lunch.

He was in forage jacket and trews, and was accompanied by Mr. Shaw, a small, fair youth, who had seen Sylvia once before, and been immensely smitten. Mr. Murray came up and shook hands.

"This is a pleasant surprise," he said. "I have been on duty, and am now on my way to the tailor's with Mr. Shaw. Miss Alison, may I introduce Mr. Shaw, and may we lunch at your table?"

"Your good deeds, or rather intentions, have gone before you, Mr. Shaw," said Sylvia, sweetly. "I have always declared I should like you since I heard that you wanted to give a dance—haven't I, Mr. Murray?"

"I am sure Shaw feels immensely flattered," said Murray, pitying that youth's confusion at this address.

The conversation remained almost entirely between Sylvia and Murray. Mr. Shaw was shy, and rather taken aback by Sylvia's remarks, and Floss was annoyed at being entrapped into what she could not but conclude was an arranged meeting. This was the feeling she acknowledged to herself, and there mingled with it a less clearly defined sensation of distress and irritation as she observed the perfect understanding between Sylvia and Murray. So she drank her coffee, and said little.

"Now," said Murray, seeing that Floss had begun to put on her gloves, preparatory to making a move, "what were you thinking of doing this afternoon?"

"Nothing particular," said Sylvia, hastily. "We did our shopping in the morning."

"Mr. Shaw and I were thinking—it is band day at barracks, and if you would let us escort you?"

"Sylvia," Floss interposed quietly, "you know we have to go back to Lees', and I must be home early."

"I don't know anything about your having to be home early," said Sylvia; "but as for Lees', it will not take us a minute. It would be fun to go, wouldn't it, Floss?"

"It is utterly out of the question," said Floss, abruptly, and rising as she spoke.

"There will be plenty of ladies there, I assure you, Miss Egerton," said Murray, deprecatingly.

"Yes," said Sylvia, "it is quite absurd! Everybody goes."

"And nobody will know who you have come with," added Murray—a remark which, upon reflection, he would have preferred to leave unsaid.

"I am sorry, Sylvia, but I don't think we could go like that," said Floss, speaking more in her usual tone. "We had better go back to Lees' now, I think."

"Well, at least we can see you so far on your way," said Murray; and when they started, he and Sylvia fell behind in the most natural way possible. Sylvia was annoyed—annoyed, too, with Murray, for apparently taking things so tranquilly.

"I have half a mind to go by myself," she had muttered defiantly, for Floss's special benefit, but she knew very well that this was impossible. Still, it was distinctly annoying to find that Murray did not seem to share either her disappointment or her anger with Floss. He was as cheerful as possible—insisting, despite all military regulations, in taking possession of all Sylvia's parcels, and Floss's too, before they left Weldon's. Captain Atterly was lunching with the Grimshaws, he assured his companions, laughingly, so there was no chance of his being caught in the act.

He said this half to Floss, and did not seem to be at all offended with her.

"Isn't it scorchingly hot?" was his very original remark when they got out to the street, made in, if anything, a more cheerful voice than usual.

This was a nice way of taking advantage of their first opportunity of being alone together, Sylvia thought—but she was too full of her grievance to endure this descent to commonplaces.

"Isn't it annoying of Floss?" she said. "I should have liked to go so much."

"Yes, it would have been very nice," said Murray, without enthusiasm.

"I believe she guesses that I arranged to meet you, and is angry about it," pursued Sylvia, "and that is partly why she won't go."

Murray was silent.

"Don't you think so?" said Sylvia, impatiently. "I declare I don't believe you *wanted* us to go to barracks!"

"You know very well that I did, Miss Alison," said Murray, softly; "but after all, I am not sure that your coming to barracks with only Shaw and me would not have been—rather a mistake. You see this is such a gossiping little place."

Sylvia flushed crimson.

"That comes very well from you, when you asked us to go!" she said, angrily.

"Don't be vexed with me, Miss Alison," said Murray, in a low voice; "it is because you don't understand what an awful little hole for gossip this is."

"Much I care what people say!" said Sylvia indignantly.

"But *I* care, for your sake," said Murray. "I have been vexed with myself for asking you to meet me and—"

"Oh, you think Floss right there, too?" said Sylvia, sharply. "I have no doubt you think me forward, and—"

"Miss Alison," said Murray, turning his grave eyes full on her flushed, indignant face, with that tender look in them which Floss had known so well, "I

wonder have you any idea what I really *do* think of you? And as far as to-day is concerned, I blame myself for taking advantage of your innocence."

This was not exactly the way to conciliate Sylvia. Her indignation was immensely increased by being suspected of innocence!

"You have no idea how I have heard fellows talk of some of the girls about here, and it would hurt me more than I can say—" He paused.

"Well, now you have a chance to talk about me!" said Sylvia, with a wrathful laugh.

Murray looked at her reproachfully.

"And you can compare my conduct with that of your paragon, Miss Egerton!" added Sylvia.

"I do think a great deal of Miss Egerton, and admire her very much," said Murray, deliberately, "but—"

"Then it is a great pity you did not walk up from Weldon's with her, and leave me to make Mr. Shaw's acquaintance," said Sylvia, still indignant. "Why on earth did you not walk with her? I am sure I was most willing that you should."

Murray allowed so long a pause to elapse before he spoke, that they were only a few steps from Lees', where the other two were waiting by the door.

Consequently he was obliged to lower his voice still more.

"I did not walk with her," he said, in the slow, grave voice which made all his speeches doubly impressive, "because I preferred to walk with you—because I would rather walk with you than with any one in the world."

And then they came up to the others, and the two young officers said good-bye.

"We shall meet to-morrow evening at the Carrs'," said Murray, trying to see Sylvia's averted face.

"I am very sorry you can't come down to barracks," said Mr. Shaw to Sylvia, and she turned to him with a warmth which she felt ought to annoy Murray, though it is to be feared it only caused him a secret smile.

Sylvia was as sulky as her naturally sweet temper would allow her to be. She finished her shopping, appealing to Floss for no word of advice, and then they walked down to the stables in silence.

Neither of them spoke till they had driven out of Delagherty and found themselves on the shady road, with its straggling, sweet-smelling hedges.

Floss was repentantly conscious of her sharpness with Sylvia, and aware that she had allowed herself to become unnecessarily irritated. She began deprecatingly: "Sylvia dear, I am very sorry, but I don't think we could very well have gone. We must get Mrs. Carr or papa to take us some day, if you would really care to go."

"I am sure I don't see what sin we would have committed by going with Mr. Shaw and Mr. Murray to-day," said Sylvia.

"It just—wouldn't have done," said Floss. "I am sorry I was so sharp about it, Sylvia, but I do think I was right."

And then Sylvia's natural sweet temper conquered, and she became bright and caressing all in a moment, with a suddenness which was always a surprise to Floss.

CHAPTER VII.

IDLE DAYS.

MRS. CARR'S dinner-party duly came off next day, and some, at least, of her guests found it very pleasant, though it was hardly a success from the hostess's point of view. Mrs. Carr had a most genuine pity and affection for Floss, mingled perhaps with a little harmless weakness for match-making, and ever since the girl was eighteen, her would-be patroness had suffered at intervals from having her best-laid projects disturbed by the intractability of her *protégée.*

However, she had never allowed herself to become discouraged. She doubted not that the right man would come some day, and if he made his appearance in the shape of a good-looking, rich young fellow like Murray—well, so much the better: Floss should not lose the opportunity through want of Mrs. Carr's assistance.

Everything went well at first. Mrs. Carr had arranged that Murray should take Floss in to dinner, and when she was able to glance in their direction, she saw that conversation certainly did not seem to

flag between them, and as far as she could judge, both seemed content with their position.

But it would have been wiser on Mrs. Carr's part not to have placed Sylvia and Mr. Shaw just opposite —Sylvia looking prettier than ever in all the sparkle and excitement of her first dinner-party, talking to Mr. Shaw with even more animation than usual, and showing Murray that he was not yet forgiven, by carefully abstaining from a glance in his direction.

Perhaps this added something to his devotion to Floss, but, in any case, he was always pleased to talk to her.

As for Floss herself, before dinner was over she began to believe that it was chance that had made their being together less frequent than usual lately—chance, magnified by her imagination.

He had said as they went downstairs: "I am very sorry I asked you to come to barracks yesterday, Miss Egerton, but it is so long since I have had a chance of talking to you."

And then Floss—Floss, whom her family looked upon as a model of common sense—Floss began to believe that it was she whom Murray had wished to talk to, and that he had after all never been untrue to their "friendship." As for Murray, he said to himself that it was all quite true—he *had* not had a talk with her for a long time, he *did* enjoy talking to her, and probably would have done so if they had gone to barracks. And, in truth, he did not think much of such an ordinarily civil speech at all. But then, he hardly knew how much his manner added to his simplest words.

But Mrs. Carr thought everything was going marvellously well. Even after dinner, when the men came into the drawing-room all seemed right. It was a lovely night, and almost everybody had strolled out to the lawn. Sylvia and Floss were together, and after a time Murray seemed to join them naturally enough. Mr. Shaw had gone to them immediately—Sylvia had succeeded in making an impression, though perhaps not a very deep one, on his susceptible heart—but Murray stayed talking, first to one and then to another, while Sylvia scarcely concealed her impatience and indignation at his want of haste. Finally he found himself beside them in the most natural manner possible, and Mrs. Carr saw that he addressed himself first to Floss, and was content.

It was not till everybody was summoned into the drawing-room to listen to a duet from the Miss Grimshaws, that Mrs. Carr discovered that Mr. Shaw and Miss Egerton were in the room, whilst Sylvia and Murray were nowhere to be seen.

She crossed over to Floss when the duet was over, and a pianoforte solo about to begin.

"Where is Miss Alison?" she said, in tones of displeasure. "It is getting too cold to be out of doors."

"I don't know. I dare say she is on the lawn," said Floss. "I am sure she will be in in a few minutes."

But some of the guests had already begun to depart before the graceless pair made their appearance, Sylvia just a little abashed, but radiantly happy, and looking extremely pretty.

She was no favourite with Mrs. Carr, who had never approved of Floss's friendship with her, and she now received her very coldly; indeed, it is undeniable that Miss Sylvia deserved nothing better just then.

But to Floss the indignation, which Mrs. Carr had with some difficulty refrained from expressing to Sylvia, found some small vent.

"My dear, I would not have asked her here if I had imagined her capable of throwing herself at a young man's head in that way! It is so difficult for a man to get away from a girl like that, and to keep him out there when I know he wanted to talk to you—!"

"Sylvia is *not* like that; she is a very pretty girl, and I am sure he did not want to get away at all, and didn't require any keeping—I should not if I were a man," said Floss, with a laugh that did not come quite naturally: "and really, Mrs. Carr, we were both the better of a little variety, after being all dinner together."

And then Floss escaped, leaving Mrs. Carr under the impression that, after all, it was the same in this case as it had always been, and that Floss did not care in the least.

But Floss, driving home with her father and Sylvia, knew better—knew it, too, with the bitterest shame and self-reproach. She knew, too, that never again, let Murray speak as he might, would she be deceived. But to find that she had given her love unsought, even to a man who had behaved to her as he had done—! For Floss was no fool—she did

not deceive herself with the name of friendship any longer. Her feeling for Murray must be recognised, faced, and conquered, and, till it could be conquered, hidden away, so that no one should ever guess it had existed.

And Mrs. Carr, who did not give up hope, found Murray the reverse of amenable. She asked him to dinner, and then to tennis, but he, having carefully ascertained that Sylvia had an invitation on neither occasion, found an excuse for both.

Worse than all, on the day of the tennis-party he calmly spent the afternoon at Heath Cottage, and stayed to dinner, trusting to chance, in a way which his acquaintance with Delagherty might have told him was desperate, that Mrs. Carr would never hear of his proceedings.

It was the third time he had dined at Heath Cottage within ten days, and Mr. Alison was not oblivious of the fact. Floss had been there the first time, asked purposely to meet him; but since then, Mr. Alison was quite aware there had been no question of her necessity to Murray's pleasure.

And now, while he glanced over the paper after dinner, he was not so unobservant as the other two imagined.

He remarked how Sylvia allowed herself to be engrossed by the young Scotchman in the way which rendered her so dangerously attractive to men—of appearing, for the time being, utterly oblivious of the existence of any one else in the world; he observed, too, that Murray did not seem to be devoting any time to regret for Floss's absence.

He knew a little more about Murray now than he had done when he had described him to Sylvia as a grave young man with a big nose; and what he had heard, combined with Murray's lingering pressure of Sylvia's hand, when he rose to say good-night, made him resolve to speak to his daughter, much as he dreaded such a task.

But he still put off the evil moment, and perhaps he might never have made up his mind to the effort, had not the last straw been laid, by a wild project on the part of Sylvia, who was as idle as any girl well might be, that she should learn Latin from Mr. Murray.

The lessons started very well, and were carried on with great vigour for three days; there was not even the fishing to distract Murray now. Harry and Billy spent their time in grumbling at the flax-water, which had spoilt it for them, and looking forward to the 12th. They played tennis in the interval, and wondered at the equanimity of Murray, who had not even a chance of shooting leave to console him this year.

But, alas! the lessons soon came to an ignominious termination. Sylvia has not even got to "amo, amas, amat," when Mr. Alison, happening to hear her mention them, remonstrated, and finally put a veto on their continuance.

He had, until now, let Sylvia go pretty much her own way, and though fond and proud of her, was rather apt to forget all about her when she was not present.

However, this time he spoke to her very seriously.

"Sylvia," he said, "I don't care to have you become so intimate with Mr. Murray. He is always mixed up with some woman or other, and I should not like to have you talked about with him."

"Well, Gov., I only wanted to improve my education; I shall have to get Harry to coach me instead."

Sylvia was in a most amiable humour, as indeed was generally the case, and mightily enjoyed teasing her father as much as she dared.

"You will kindly remember that Harry Egerton is not your brother, however well you may know him," her father replied sharply; "I forbid you to learn Latin from anybody."

Sylvia shrugged her shoulders, and looked as much the picture of melancholy resignation as if she had cared for Latin in the least, or had had the faintest idea of getting Harry to be her instructor.

"Very well, father," she said meekly, so meekly that poor Mr. Alison began to feel himself a tyrant.

"Really, Murray is hardly a man with whom any girl should be on such intimate terms," he said, apologetically.

He had expressed himself rather too strongly, and Sylvia was quick to take advantage of it.

"Why, Gov., if he is so bad as all that, of course I don't want to have anything more to do with him," she said, standing in front of her father, her curly brown head a little bent, and her hands clasped together, the prettiest possible picture of submission.

"Why, I scarcely mean as much as that," said poor Mr. Alison, feeling slightly conscience-stricken; "but

he is an unsteady fellow in many ways, and certainly not a man I should care to see you marry."

Sylvia flushed scarlet.

"Father!" she said, "Mr. Murray is just a pleasant, friendly man, but I don't care if I never see him again, and as for marrying—!"

"Then that is all right," said her father, in a relieved tone; he was extremely anxious to end the conversation, "I needn't say any more; you will be careful, Sylvia?"

Sylvia came up close to him, and put both her arms round his neck.

"Yes, Gov. dear," she said, rubbing her cheek against his coat, "I am going to be a good girl. And now we needn't say any more about it, need we? You have done about as much harm as possible, and put any amount of things into my head that I never thought of before."

She laughed, but she meant what she said, and she was right.

From that time Murray possessed about double his former interest for her: a man who had been "unsteady"—interesting and mysterious statement! Sylvia wondered a good deal in what way Murray's unsteadiness had betrayed itself, and consequently she necessarily thought about him a good deal. A man whom her father would not like her to marry! Certainly Sylvia had no intention of marrying for many a long day, but when she did, she did not think a man's former "unsteadiness" would be an insuperable objection.

As for poor Mr. Alison, Sylvia was an enigma, and

a troublesome one, to him. He was almost convinced that he had done all that was necessary when he had warned her, especially when he had told her that Murray was mixed up with other women. And Sylvia made absolutely no difference in her treatment of the young man. She had the sublimest confidence in herself, and had no fears for anybody's peace of mind, except perhaps, Murray's! It was very pleasant to be with him, and though she was so sweet about it that few people perceived the fact, Sylvia seldom or never gave up her own will and way to others.

And Floss? Sylvia noticed no change in her, and had almost forgotten that she had been Murray's first friend, but his conscience often smote him about her. She had grown, perhaps, a little quieter than before, but she showed no sign of being hurt by the cessation of Murray's companionship with her.

She did not attempt to avoid him, and only he himself noticed the very slight change in her manner when they were together, and he knew that it was his fault. He knew, too, that he was infatuated with Sylvia; that the best side of him was not uppermost when he was with her, as it had been with Floss. When he was away from her he could resolve not to yield to her fascination, and to return to his allegiance with Floss; but as soon as he saw her again, everything gave way to his passionate admiration.

What was the good of saying to himself that she was only a pretty little schoolgirl, when he was away from her, when he could neither keep away, nor reason when with her?

And Murray had very seldom in his life tried to resist any woman's attraction for him; even to stop to analyse it was a new departure, the result of his half-guilty feeling with regard to Floss, who was not like the other girls he had known.

As for thinking what would be the end of it all, that never entered his head, any more than it did Sylvia's.

CHAPTER VIII.

SYLVIA MAKES GOOD RESOLUTIONS.

"FLOSS, I want to talk to you."

"Sylvia, I really am very sorry, but I must order the dinner, and then I have to hear Dicky a column of spelling, and fifty other things after that."

"Well, Floss," Sylvia said coaxingly, "let me hear Dicky his spelling, while you order the dinner, and do let the fifty other things wait till I have talked to you."

"I'll be very glad if you will hear Dicky his spelling, and I can talk to you for a bit afterwards. You know, Sylvia, if you wait till the afternoon, I can always talk to you."

"And *you* know, Floss, that if a thing comes into my head, I never can wait!"

Floss laughed, and went downstairs, but when she returned, twenty minutes later, the scene was less peaceful.

Dicky was in floods of indignant tears; Sylvia supremely contemptuous, and rather cross.

Both began simultaneously to complain to Floss.

"He is too stupid and obstinate," said Sylvia.

"She doesn't hear me right," protested Dicky, tearfully.

Floss restored peace with some trouble, and then she and Sylvia retreated to the drawing-room, leaving Dicky to a long addition sum.

"Then, without prelude, Sylvia suddenly announced her desires to Floss.

"Now, Floss dear, don't work, please. You do aggravate me so, and make me so hot. I want to tell you I am tired of idling and being of no use, and I want to do something. What can I do?"

Floss fairly gasped; this was decidedly the very last question she had expected.

"My dear Sylvia!" she exclaimed in astonishment, "what is the meaning of this?"

"Nothing, except what I say. I want to be useful, and what can I do?"

"Do you mean it, really, Sylvia?" said Floss, still rather doubtful. She had certainly never suspected Sylvia of having as yet any ideas or wishes beyond amusement.

"Of course I mean it; why shouldn't I?" said Sylvia, impatiently.

"Well, I am sure there are a great many things you could do," said Floss, thoughtfully; "for instance, I do think if you were to undertake some of the housekeeping, it would be a great relief to Mrs. Kelly."

"Oh, nonsense, Floss; I did not mean a small thing like that! I meant something to do real good."

"Well, I don't know of any way in which you could

do more real good; Mrs. Kelly is very old, and not equal to much bother now."

But Floss had begun to be conscious that this sudden project did not mean any very great transformation on Sylvia's part.

"I did not mean that at all," Miss Alison replied with decision; "I don't know anything about it, and I should hate it."

"Well, I thought you wanted to do good," said Floss, shortly.

Sylvia wriggled.

"How horrid you are, Floss!" she said impatiently; "you are as staid and prim as if you were a hundred, and go on at me just the way the Gov.—I mean, my father does. There!" with returning good temper, and a laugh, "that is another of my good resolutions—to drop slang."

"I am very glad of it," said Floss.

"It's Mr. Murray's doing; he told me he hated to hear a girl say 'the Gov.' And, to tell you the truth, the other thing is his doing too."

"What, wanting to be useful?"

Sylvia nodded.

"He said how much he thought of you, how unselfish you were, and what a useful life yours was; he said he wondered I did not try to follow your example."

"Why, he seems to have given you quite a lecture," said Floss, by way of saying something. Her cheeks were glowing, and her eyes very bright.

"Well, I'm sure he's right. Anyway, I intend to be useful."

"You seem to think a good deal of what Mr. Murray says," remarked Floss, quietly.

"I do," replied Sylvia, composedly. "Do you know, Floss, I believe I am a little bit in love with several men, and a little bit the most with Mr. Murray."

Floss looked a little amused, and a good deal shocked.

"What *do* you mean, Sylvia?" she said.

"You needn't look so horrified," Sylvia laughed; "I assure you it is not serious. I don't intend to fall really in love for ages. It's like being vaccinated—one must take it slightly to avoid having it badly."

"Really, Sylvia, you are very odd," said Floss, reprovingly.

"Well, I have been vaccinated heaps of times—a little bit last holidays with George; then at school, with Nell Dalrymple's brother Jack; then—"

"Sylvia, I don't like this kind of conversation; you ought to be ashamed to talk in this way, and it certainly has nothing to do with being useful."

"But some day the right person will come, I suppose," said Sylvia, leaning forward, her hands clasped round her knees, and a momentarily dreamy look in her violet eyes—"at least, if it is true that there is a right person for every one."

And then she went on, with a laugh: "The right person for me will be somebody who is very much in love with me, and will always let me have my own way.—So Mr. Murray won't suit," she added abruptly. "If I am selfish, so is he; and there would certainly be a row in that household!"

"You seem to be thinking a good deal of Mr. Murray," said Floss, gravely.

But Sylvia would not talk on this subject any longer.

"Floss," she said, petulantly, "I am waiting for you to tell me of something useful to do."

"Well, Sylvia, what do you *want* to do?" Floss said, resignedly.

This seemed to be the answer desired.

"I was thinking I might begin by starting a class for poor children at home on Sundays," said Sylvia, briskly.

Floss was silent, but not because she was struck dumb with admiration of this virtuous project, as possibly Sylvia had expected.

"Well," she said impatiently, "don't you think that it would be a good thing to do?"

And then Floss laughed a little.

"Oh, Sylvia, Sylvia!" she said, "I am afraid you are not the best person in the world for that kind of work! Think of this morning, and Dicky's spelling!"

Sylvia got up from her chair in high indignation. Ridicule was the one thing she could not stand.

"I hope there are not many children as stupid as Dicky!" she said wrathfully; and indignantly marching off to the piano, she proceeded to soothe her wounded feelings by a succession of very energetic polkas and galops.

Her last remark had made Floss quite too angry to attempt a reconciliation. She had a good opportunity now to go and do all she wanted, but instead she sat very still thinking.

Indignation on Dicky's account did not last long, and her thoughts soon wandered to the earlier part of their conversation.

Mr. Murray—ah, she could not think of him now, happily as she used to do. Did Sylvia care for him? Had he ever given her any reason to do so? But surely, if she had cared in the least, she could never have spoken of him as she had done that day.

She thought of the happy afternoons she and Murray had spent together before Sylvia came, with a feeling that was not all pain. Yes, he had been right when he had said they could never be the same again—he had been right, though not in the way he meant at the time.

And what a fool she had been—what a fool she was still! Just because he was the first man who had ever made sweet speeches to her. Perhaps other girls would have thought nothing of all he had said and looked? But, no; this Floss could not believe when she remembered.

Her thoughts were so engrossed, that the entrance of the very person she was thinking of, ushered in by Dicky, made her start and blush crimson.

Sylvia stopped playing, and came over to shake hands with him, with recovered amiability, and it was she who did most of the talking. Floss was even more silent than usual, and Murray was not quite at his ease.

Dicky, in no hurry to return to his sum, fidgeted about near Murray, his small mind agitated by a very anxious question.

He did not mind interrupting in the least, and

finding his suggestive looks unheeded, and that he was unnoticed even by Floss, he came to the point with startling abruptness.

"Mr. Murray, have you got any chocolates for me?" he said persuasively. After all, were not his chocolates just as important to Dicky as their less tangible loves and hates and indifferences were to the others?

"Oh, I'm awfully sorry, Dicky; I forgot all about it," said Murray, starting.

"I have almost forgotten what they taste like," remarked Dicky, pathetically.

"Dicky, Dicky, you mustn't be so greedy," remonstrated Floss.

"It was too bad of me to forget," said Murray. "Never mind, Dick; I will bring you some next time."

"I know puffeckly well why you don't bring me any now," said Dicky, with severe dignity; "it's because there is nothing you want me to do."

There was an awful silence. Murray was scarlet, Floss uneasy; even Sylvia saw that something was wrong.

It is to be feared Dicky understood perfectly well that he was about to make himself intensely disagreeable, though further than that he could not of course comprehend, sharp child though he was.

"You don't care to be with any one but *her* now," he said dolefully, politely indicating Sylvia with his thumb.

No one spoke, because for the moment no one could think of anything whatever to say.

Murray was inwardly consigning Dicky to nowhere particularly agreeable, with great fervour. His one idea was flight, and he put an end to this dreadful pause by rising abruptly.

"I will go and see if Harry is anywhere about," he said, and made a hasty exit, leaving Dicky fully master of the situation.

Then this youth also took himself off, after a few agreeable remarks, which met with no response.

Sylvia was the only person to whom this little interlude, if embarrassing, had not been wholly unpleasant.

"Now, Floss, I am quite in good temper again," she said amiably, "so we'd better really settle about being useful. I give you leave to be as disagreeably practical as you like."

CHAPTER IX.

A MORNING PROPOSAL.

"GOOD morning, Sylvia."

"Good morning, Harry."

Sylvia was busily engaged in writing to Dublin for patterns with a view to a new dress, and she was in a hurry for the post, and much exercised to describe exactly what she wanted.

She was sitting at a table by one of the drawing-room windows, and after giving Harry a friendly little nod over her shoulder, she returned to her letter.

Harry seated himself on the arm of a chair, and began to fidget with the tassel of its cushion.

"Sylvia," he said at last, very gravely.

"Yes?" she answered, without looking up.

"Sylvia, I want to talk to you seriously."

"All right; if you can't wait, I am listening," carelessly.

"You know I am going to the mountain this afternoon?"

"Oh, yes," said Sylvia. "If that is all you have got to say, I have been aware that to-morrow will be the 12th for some time."

"And I shall be away for a week," said Harry, with an odd nervousness.

"I suppose so," said Sylvia, without looking up from her letter, or appearing in any way unduly excited by the intelligence.

"And before I go, I have got a question to ask you," he said, with much hesitation.

"Yes," she murmured, writing busily.

Then Harry proceeded to say what he meant very abruptly, without any of the delicate introduction he had projected.

"I want to ask you, will you marry me?" he said, with an abruptness which he felt was almost brutal.

"Yes, in a minute," said Sylvia. She was entirely engrossed with her patterns, and had only a dim perception that Harry had asked her to do *something*.

"Sylvia!" Harry exclaimed, in a tone of such indignation that she jumped, "attend to me for a moment."

Sylvia had as yet entirely failed to realise that there was sentiment in the air. She turned round obediently, and waited, pen in hand.

"Well?" she said, after a moment's silence.

"You have put me out—I can't go on!" said Harry, wrathfully.

"Well, then, I'll write till you are ready to go on."

Sylvia looked as if she were going to begin again, but Harry leant forward and took the pen out of her hand in a most brotherly and unloverlike way.

"I was asking you if you would marry me," he said crossly.

Harry never was cross, so between his words and his tone Sylvia was much surprised.

She laughed. "What a silly humour you are in, my dear boy," she said lightly. "And now, if that's all you have to say, you might give me back my pen."

"Sylvia, I am in earnest!" said Harry, energetically.

"So am I in earnest about having my letter in time for the post."

"I will bring it down to the post myself, if you will listen to me," he said very gravely. "I am not joking, Sylvia."

"Then you must be mad," she said conclusively.

"I don't see why I should not be taken as seriously as any other man," said Harry, getting a little annoyed. "This is the sort of thing that settles a man's life for him"—

"Rubbish, my dear!" said Sylvia, unsympathetically.

"Well, whether you believe it or not, I mean what I say," persisted Harry.

"You mean," said Sylvia, slowly, "that you—seriously—ask me to marry you?"

"I do," said Harry, solemnly.

"It isn't a joke of some kind?"

"Honour bright, it isn't; I mean it."

Then Sylvia, who had been looking most hopefully grave, suddenly burst out laughing, She laughed till even Harry reluctantly joined her.

"Oh, Harry, you are too absurd!" she said at last, as she began by degrees to recover her gravity.

"I don't see what is absurd in a man asking a girl to marry him," said Harry, stiffly.

Sylvia seemed much inclined to begin to laugh again for a moment; but she restrained herself, and said gravely:

"Well, but, Harry, that is not the way to propose. You have never told me you loved me, or anything of that kind."

"Don't be absurd, Sylvia," returned Harry in an aggravated tone; "you know you and I never went in for sentiment."

"But then, we never went in for proposals either," responded Sylvia, her mouth quivering suspiciously.

"You know I am very fond of you, and all that," said Harry, transferring his attentions from the tassel of a pillow to an ivory paper-knife.

"Fond, indeed! You don't even offer me love to live on, and we should certainly have nothing else. Harry, I *believe* you're chaffing!"

"I am not!" he said hotly. "Will you hold your tongue, and listen to me?"

"Very well, Harry dear," resignedly; "but I think you had better let me coach you up a bit in proposals first. I really *never* heard of a man telling the girl he was proposing to to hold her tongue."

"Are you going to listen? When I pass my exam., I shall start upon a hundred a year—"

"And upon that colossal fortune you feel justified in setting up a wife?"

"There's no need for us to be married at once. In a couple of years I shall probably have three or four hundred a year—quite enough to marry on—"

"Do put down that paper-knife, Harry dear; I shouldn't like to have it broken. And now listen to *me.* I haven't the faintest desire to get married just at present; even four hundred a year possesses no tremendous inducement; and, finally—suppose you don't pass your exam.? What becomes of this fine castle of cards then?"

"I shall pass it." Harry was not unnaturally getting annoyed. "Just think of the fun we should have together in London, Sylvia! Remember, you can't come and stop with me unless you marry me."

"Oh, I don't think you can really be any older than my Billy! I sha'n't marry 'for fun' when I do marry," Sylvia returned, sedately. "We have been talking a great deal of nonsense, Harry. Don't bother your head about marrying for many a long day."

"Then you won't be engaged to me? We needn't think of marrying for *ages*, you know," said Harry, persuasively.

"I would as soon think of marrying Billy!" responded Sylvia. "Now, Harry, don't look cross; you never are cross."

"You might at least have taken me seriously," said he, in an aggrieved tone.

"Taken you seriously! Good gracious! have I not taken you seriously? Mr. Egerton, I am sorry to be obliged to decline your flattering offer. Is that better?"

Harry got up, flushing angrily.

"It is horrid of you to go on like that, Sylvia, when you know I meant it," he said.

"Well, but, Harry, you've destroyed a lot of my illusions. I have often wondered what my first proposal would be like; and now—I strongly advise you to practise before you propose to any one else. You may practise on me if you like, so long as you don't select post-time again. By the way, I hope your offer to take my letter down for me wasn't contingent on my accepting you? Just wait a minute; I have only a few lines to add—but, oh, you funny boy! you have put everything I wanted to say out of my head! Oh dear! even Floss can't help laughing at this!"

"Great Scott, Sylvia! you aren't going to tell any one?" said Harry, in dismay.

"Oh, Harry, I can't keep such a good joke to myself! Don't say I mustn't tell any one," said Sylvia, sweetly.

But Harry was, not unnaturally, obdurate.

CHAPTER X.

SYLVIA'S AUNT.

SYLVIA spent the rest of that day in a state of suppressed amusement. She longed to tell somebody of the joke; but Harry had been unkind enough to make her promise that she would not.

Mr. Murray, who called in the afternoon, found her in the wildest spirits. They walked over to the Elms for tea, and Sylvia had never been gayer or less sentimental in her mood.

Murray, on the contrary, was feeling decidedly depressed. To-morrow would be the 12th, and everybody was going, or gone, to the mountains—everybody, that is to say, except the unfortunate Black Watch officers, before whom there was no shooting leave this year, nothing but detachment duty and riots. And Murray had received several invitations to Scotland, and had even meditated a September shooting party himself. He could not grumble to Sylvia about the impossibility of leaving Delagherty; but, instead, he chose a subject which *should* have enlisted her sympathies. He informed her that he expected orders for Belfast any day; but Sylvia unkindly refused to express the least sorrow.

"I suppose you'll come and say good-bye if you've time?" she remarked indifferently.

"I am sure you don't doubt that," he said tenderly; "don't I spend most of my time here? I'll see you again to-morrow, and then I have to take some men to Omagh, and sha'n't be back till Saturday night. Shall you be at the Egertons' on Sunday evening?"

"Yes, I suppose so—if I am back from Aunt Alice's."

"Is that the aunt who lives down at Kilberry?"

"Yes, my great-aunt really—the nicest old lady. I am to go down by myself, too, as the Gov.—my father can't come."

The significance of her tone was by no means lost on Murray.

"I believe I am going in that direction on Sunday," he said; "and don't you think we may as well go by the same train?"

"I suppose we may as well," said Sylvia, sweetly.

They reached the Elms in the middle of a few further little arrangements, and Sylvia precipitated herself into the drawing-room in her usual unceremonious fashion.

She drew back equally hastily, however, when she saw that Floss was not alone; instead, she was busily engaged in regaling Mrs. Carr with afternoon tea.

Sylvia entertained a great aversion to Mrs. Carr, which, truth to tell, was entirely reciprocated by that lady, who looked upon Miss Alison as irreclaimably fast, and a very bad companion for her favourite Floss.

Sylvia loitered about with Mr. Murray, awaiting Mrs. Carr's departure, and utterly refusing to go in while she was there; and Murray was not able to wait till she had left, as he was obliged to be back in barracks for mess, so Sylvia finally made her appearance alone, followed in a few minutes by Harry, who did not seem best pleased to find her there.

Sylvia and Harry were both anxious to be supplied with tea, and distressed Floss's economical soul by the reckless inroads they made into the untouched cake, which she had fondly hoped to preserve for a future visitor.

"Well," said Sylvia, briskly, when all her wants had been supplied, "what was that old frump conversing you about?"

"She wants Harry and me to go to a tennis there next Tuesday," returned Floss. "I suppose you will want to go if you are back from the mountain, Harry? There is to be dancing as well, I believe."

"All right; I'll go if there's dancing," Harry responded, with his mouth full of cake.

"My dear Harry," remonstrated Sylvia, gravely, "I really did not think you would care to mix in society just at present."

Harry looked cross, and shrugged his shoulders, devoting all his attention to his tea, and Floss could not imagine what Sylvia was talking about.

"I shall have to stand at the railings and gaze at you, feeling myself outside the gates of paradise!" said Sylvia, cheerfully. "Never mind; *I* have *my* small dissipation in view for Sunday. By the way,

that is chiefly why I came over—I want to know if you will take my class on Sunday, Floss dear?"

"Now, Sylvia, was it not our agreement that I should not have to take your class? I told you I should not have time."

"But, Floss, Aunt Alice has asked me to go and see her, and father says I am to go."

"Well, won't some other day do equally well? Remember, you have only taken your class for one Sunday really, as the first time you insisted on my being with you."

But Sylvia, having something more than a visit to her aunt connected with her Sunday's expedition, would not hear of putting it off, and brought forward so many excellent and unanswerable reasons for the necessity of her going on that particular day, that Floss yielded as usual.

Harry listened to the conversation in silence. At another time he would probably have expressed his feelings pretty freely; but just now he was very much on his dignity with Sylvia. This young lady turned her attention to him as soon as her point was gained.

"Well, Harry, hasn't the ridiculous side of this morning's proceedings struck you yet?" she said agreeably.

"I can't say it has—yet," very stiffly.

"As for me, I have scarcely stopped laughing ever since."

"I am very glad you are amused," still more stiffly.

"You two are talking in riddles," said Floss. "What is it all about?"

"It isn't my fault we are talking in riddles," replied Sylvia. "Oh, Harry, I should love to tell her!"

"Sylvia!" Harry put in warningly.

"Never fear; I shall keep my promise. But if I am not to share the joke with any one else, at least you might let me laugh over it with you."

"Sylvia, you have no more feelings than a fish!" exclaimed Harry, wrathfully, and to Floss's intense surprise he beat an angry retreat.

"What on earth is the matter with him?" she said wonderingly to Sylvia, "I never knew him cross before."

But Sylvia only laughed and had the grace to keep his secret.

CHAPTER XI.

THE HISTORY OF A KISS.

'YOU'RE all right then, Sylvia? Sure you don't mind going by yourself?"

"Not I, father; you forget what a good traveller I am, and I know going to see Aunt Alice is not your idea of bliss."

"No, I can't say that it is, seeing that it means sitting in a room with a blazing fire and all the windows shut, on a hot day in August. I will send the trap to meet you at the last train—the 8.20."

"Very well. Oh—Mr. Murray—how do you do?"

Sylvia had been leaning out of the carriage window, ostensibly to talk to her father, and she greeted Mr. Murray with the greatest aplomb. Mr. Alison saw them off together, without an idea that their meeting was anything but the merest chance.

"Now," said Murray, as they drew near their destination, "we must settle what we are to do. Are you bound to go on and see that aunt of yours?"

"Oh, yes," said Sylvia, quickly, "it would never do not to go."

"But isn't it too bad if this little bit in the train

is to be our only time together?" Murray went on tenderly; "what time do you come back?"

"I am to reach Delagherty by half-past eight. I suppose a little before eight—the journey does not take much more than half an hour."

"I am going to stop at Belderry, this next station; I often go down there for a sail; there are very jolly boats. I *wish* you could come, and I would take you out."

"I *wish* I could," said Sylvia, regretfully.

"I'll tell you what you *might* do," exclaimed Murray, suddenly, "leave Kilberry by an earlier train, and come for a row with me till it was time for the train. What do you say to that?"

Sylvia's face flushed with delight.

"What fun it would be!" she said.

Murray looked at his watch. "Nearly one now; what time could you leave? Say four?"

But Sylvia decreed that that would be too early.

They agreed to look up the time-tables at their respective stations, and that Sylvia was to come by the nearest train to five o'clock.

"That will give us almost three hours," said Murray; "we can have a row, and then get tea somewhere."

"And there is no danger of our meeting any one we know?"

"Scarcely any, I should say," Murray replied carelessly, and Sylvia was very easily reassured.

She certainly paid her aunt a most unsatisfactory visit. Within a very short time after her arrival, she began to be in a fidget lest she should by any possi-

bility miss the train, and she finally insisted on being at the station at a most unreasonably early hour. Her aunt had never known Sylvia fussy before, and could not make her out. They had a long wait at the station, but the train did arrive at last, and Miss Alison found herself safely off, to her great satisfaction.

She greeted Murray, who was awaiting her on the station at Belderry, with a radiant face, but his own was not so radiant.

He had proposed the expedition on the spur of the moment, and as usual without a second thought, but he understood, as Sylvia did not, in what a very disagreeable position the girl might find herself.

An awkwardness was rendered more probable by the fact that Captain Atterly, one of Murray's brother officers, had come down to spend the afternoon sailing with some friends. This Murray had not been aware of when he proposed the expedition to Sylvia, but a moment's reflection would have told him how extremely unlikely it was that he could pass a Sunday afternoon in so favourite a boating place, and one he had himself visited so often, without meeting some one who knew him.

However, his qualms of conscience did not last long, and by the time he and Sylvia were in a boat on the sea together, his mind was quite at ease again, and his only precaution was to keep well away from all sailing boats.

As for Sylvia, she was in wild spirits, and enjoying the feeling of Bohemianism and naughtiness without one *arrière pensée.*

They had a glorious sail. Murray had lost his head a little, and never before had he spoken quite so tenderly, never had he seemed so utterly engrossed by his companion. She was very sorry to come ashore, and glad when Murray looked at his watch and announced that there was time for them to have tea at the hotel before starting, if Sylvia liked.

Of course Sylvia liked; she was in the humour just then to like anything and everything he might propose. She was far too excited for rational consideration, and Murray was determined not to bother his head about the proprieties for that afternoon.

He asked for a private room at the hotel, and ordered a most sumptuous tea, Sylvia declaring herself very hungry, and most appreciative of his attentions, though it was certainly rather late for afternoon tea.

They established themselves in two armchairs, with the table between them; and Sylvia made tea, and chattered and laughed, looking prettier, Murray thought, than he had ever seen her look.

But under such circumstances, if an awkward situation is possible, is it not sure to occur? It occurred in this case. Just as Murray was drinking his last cup of tea, and Sylvia saying she was sure it must be time to start, the door opened, and Captain Atterly, the very person whom Murray had most wished to avoid, looked in.

"I say, Murray," he began, and then broke off short, and came to an awkward pause.

Sylvia, thoughtless Sylvia, gave him a friendly little nod, and in her ignorance was very slightly

taken aback, but Murray looked most uncomfortable and guilty.

"How do you do, Captain Atterly?" said Sylvia, sweetly; "do let me give you some tea?"

"No, thank you," with emphasis. "I heard you were upstairs, Murray, but I had no idea—I am sure I beg your pardon."

Captain Atterly spoke in a tone of amusement and slightly veiled insolence.

"You needn't go," said Murray, uncomfortably; "I happened to meet Miss Alison—"

"I understand. I must go now, I am afraid. Good evening, Miss Alison."

And Captain Atterly beat a hasty retreat, leaving the other two looking at each other rather blankly.

Sylvia was the first to speak.

"It doesn't matter so very much, after all, does it?" she said a little anxiously.

"I don't know;—I wish to goodness the fellow had not turned up just then."

Murray looked annoyed, and felt self-reproachful.

"It can't be helped though," said Sylvia, more cheerfully, "so there is no good bothering. Have another cup of tea, by way of raising our spirits, Mr. Murray?"

"I am awfully sorry if I have got you into a mess of any kind," said Murray, accepting the tea; "it is my fault entirely."

But Sylvia only laughed.

They found Captain Atterly and another man from barracks, one of the Artillery, lounging outside the hotel door smoking, and by way of showing how

perfectly she was at ease, Sylvia stopped to speak to them. But Murray looked uneasily at his watch.

"If you want to catch this train, Miss Alison, I think we had better go at once," he said.

"I am afraid there is no chance of your catching the train to Delagherty, if that is the one you want," remarked Captain Atterly.

"We've ten minutes to the good still," replied Murray, impatiently; "we shall only have to walk quickly."

"You don't know that the train leaves a quarter of an hour earlier on Sundays, then?" said Captain Atterly, placidly; "we are stopping the night, and I thought you must intend doing so too, or I would have let you know. I am afraid there isn't another till half-past ten."

Consternation fell on the other two.

Murray would have made no further effort in the way of trains, but Sylvia hurried him off, insisting on seeing if there might not be some mistake, or at any rate some train before the half-past ten. All in vain. They reached the station to find it deserted, and they both knew well enough that between eight and the special Sunday half-past ten no train ran to Delagherty.

Murray gave vent to a muttered and uncomplimentary remark about Captain Atterly.

"He knew well enough we did *not* want to stay the night," he added aloud.

"What are we to do?" said Sylvia, helplessly.

Murray roused himself.

"One of two things," he said, after a pause: "either

you can drive back to your aunt, which is not more than three or four miles from here, or into Delagherty, which would be a longish, but still quite a practicable drive."

Sylvia had not even thought of driving, and caught joyfully at the idea.

"Oh, I will go home, please," she said eagerly.

"Then, if you will excuse me for a second, I will see about a car," answered Murray.

He was not many minutes absent, and found no difficulty in obtaining what he wanted.

He helped Sylvia on the car, and then paused.

"Shall I go with you?" he said doubtfully; "or would it be better to go back to those fellows?"

"Oh, no, what does it matter now?" said Sylvia, hastily making room for him—"and don't forget, you said you would go to the Elms for supper."

And against his better judgment, and because he strongly desired that drive in the dusk, Murray yielded.

They both enjoyed it to the full.

As if by common consent, they said no more about the annoyances of the day, but gave themselves up entirely to the pleasure of the moment.

Murray got down before they reached Delagherty, and went to barracks to dress. He pressed Sylvia's hand very warmly, and looked into her eyes very tenderly.

"Good-bye till this evening," he said softly; "I shall be a little late, but I shall come."

And Sylvia drove on alone. That she had missed her train was all the explanation she gave that even-

ing, but she dimly felt that eventually she would have to pay for her afternoon's pleasure.

It was indeed unlikely that, sooner or later, her people would not find out the real state of the case.

She did not intend going over to the Elms till after supper, so she had plenty of time to dress.

The Egertons had a kind of cold supper every Sunday to which any one who cared to come was welcome. This evening a cousin of theirs, Sylvia, and Murray, were the only guests, the two latter in the wildest and most reckless of spirits. With them as leaders, ably seconded by Harry and Billy, the whole party spent a most rollicking evening.

Floss was the only one who appeared to recollect that it was Sunday, and a few slightly scandalised remonstrances from her passed unheeded.

Finally, having all worked themselves into high spirits, at about ten o'clock they took it into their heads to go down in a body to the kitchen to make porridge.

The servants had departed to bed, and all Floss's remonstrances were explained away and laughed at.

For the first time during a visit to the Elms, Murray, though not drunk, had had quite as much wine as was good for him. How common an occurrence this was with him at mess, not even Harry knew, but never before had he run any risks at the Elms. But the day had been hot, and he had been idle, and almost insensibly he had taken more than was quite safe; not that it was enough to have any effect further than making him a little excited.

There was a great deal of chattering and laughing

as they searched for meal, and finally Sylvia went to the pump which was just outside the kitchen door to fetch some water.

She had taken a candle with her, and left the others disputing over the saucepans, but Mr. Murray followed her, pumped the water for her, and then, as she turned to go in again, he hastily shut the door, and, leaning towards her, blew out the candle.

"Mr. Murray! what do you mean!" Sylvia exclaimed; "open the door, or I shall spill the water."

He came very close to her, and laid his hand on her shoulder.

"I shall not open the door just yet," he said passionately, "you must give me a kiss first."

"Mr. Murray!"

He could not see her face, but her tone was startled and angry.

"Let me pass at once," she said; but he put his arm round her and drew her back, the water splashing all over her pretty white dress.

"I will not let you pass!" he said hotly.

She began to be a little frightened and very angry.

"If you don't let me pass this instant, Mr. Murray, I will call out," she said.

"No, I don't think you will," he returned quietly; "if you let me kiss you, you shall go in at once."

"How dare you!" she cried, with tears in her voice.

"Why are you making such a fuss?" he returned doggedly. "It will not hurt you. I could kiss you by force, but I would rather let it be by your own free will."

"You are no gentleman!" she exclaimed indignantly; "listen, they are calling us."

"They may call," he returned stolidly, and then there was silence.

Murray had drunk just enough to make him obstinate; had he been perfectly sober, he would never so far have forgotten his gentlemanly instincts.

It was quite dark: a light wind blew through the yard, ruffling Sylvia's curls. As Murray stood bending over her, it blew one against his cheek.

Sylvia was frightened at his vehemence, and half inclined to cry; yet, at the bottom of her heart the situation was not without attraction for her.

Suddenly, in the stillness, she heard the scullery door open.

Both of them started, but Murray did not relax his hold.

"They are coming!—oh, *do* let me go!" she exclaimed, unmingled dismay in her voice now.

"Then I can wait no longer!" he whispered, and catching her in his arms, he kissed her again and again.

"Now you may go," he said, and opened the door for her, almost in Harry's face.

She had restrained her impulse to cry out with some difficulty, and now she had to go forward and meet the light and Harry.

"Well," he said gruffly, "you have been a long time getting the water."

"The light was blown out," Sylvia said, in a very shaky voice.

Her dress was splashed with water, and the bowl was quite empty.

Harry refilled it in silence, and they all went back to the kitchen together.

The others were impatiently waiting: Floss said nothing, and Harry was the one to remark, with a sneer, that Sylvia appeared to be considerably blown about.

That young lady talked and laughed excitedly, but took care not to exchange another word with Murray, and to avoid him as much as possible.

"You are not really angry?" he managed to say to her, after a short refusal on her part of his escort home, and an acceptance of Harry's very cool proffer of the same.

But Sylvia turned away.

"Don't speak to me—I *hate* you!" she said with energy.

CHAPTER XII.

FETTERED.

MURRAY was most thoroughly ashamed of himself next morning.

He would gladly have forgotten the whole day's proceedings if he had been able to do so, but he could neither forget them nor Sylvia's fair little face and large violet eyes.

It did not make him at all more comfortable to be greeted on all sides by chaffing remarks, and to find that Captain Atterly and the artilleryman, having returned for early parade, had lost no time in spreading their little story, with a few additions of course.

Gossip is supposed to be a woman's business, but certainly her privileges in that direction are largely invaded in a regiment.

Murray returned some very sharp answers to the chaff with which he was overwhelmed, and felt more than he said.

He was a little in love with Sylvia, and very much conscience-stricken about her. When things were brought home to him he was good-hearted enough, this young fellow, and he was more careless than selfish.

He finally made up his mind to walk over to Heath Hall and see Sylvia at once, without waiting for the afternoon. He had a very dim idea of what he intended to do when he got there, but he vaguely felt as if it behoved him to do something, and apologise in some way to the girl.

He found her alone in the drawing-room, as he had hoped, well knowing how early Mr. Alison went to business.

There was a fire in this room almost all the year round—a weakness of Sylvia's, who was a chilly person, and on this occasion she was taking advantage of it. She was sitting on the hearthrug, with her back to the flame, and a towel round her shoulders, over which her long, thick, red-brown hair was falling loosely.

She looked surprised, but by no means abashed.

"Good morning," she said, in cool, unfriendly tones.

But Murray was prepared for a cold reception. He came over to her, and threw himself on the rug beside her.

"Have you been washing your hair?" he said, by way of opening the conversation.

"Yes; I think it must be dry by this time, and if you will excuse me I will go and put it up."

He took a curl in his hand.

"No, don't go," he said softly, "it is really quite wet still. What lovely hair you have."

Sylvia wriggled herself a little away from him.

"Please don't," she said; "let my hair go, Mr. Murray."

"You usen't to be so stern," he said, in a low voice full of reproach.

"No," sharply, "because I used to think you were to be trusted."

Murray started, and flushed up to the roots of his hair.

"Miss Alison, I can't tell you how very, *very* sorry I am about that;—won't you forgive me?"

"I can't forget it," replied Sylvia, who was begining vaguely to enjoy herself, "it was most ungentlemanly."

"I was a brute!" he said hotly; "I was ashamed of myself the moment after. I wish it had been any other girl but you, my darling!"

When he began the sentence, Murray had not had the very vaguest idea of ending it in such fashion. But Sylvia looked so lovely, with her flushed face, and the firelight gleaming on her fair hair, that all he was conscious of was a longing to kiss her again at any price.

He drew his hand through her hair very gently, and she said nothing.

"My darling, I love you!" he whispered, his dark eyes full of passionate tenderness; "may I not kiss you now?"

He put his arm round her, and drew her unresisting to him. He felt her hair brush his face, and then he took her in his arms, kissing her hotly, madly.

She was again as much frightened as anything else, but she made no resistance—she did not dare to resist—and half-pleased, half-startled, listened to his vehement assurances of love.

They were not interrupted for some time, but at last Sylvia heard a door open, and without a word fled

away, through the next room and up the back stairs. She got to her own room without meeting anybody, and, locking the door, sat down with glowing cheeks and quivering lips to think. But she was much too excited to be able to think rationally. She could not even make up her mind whether this wonderful thing that had happened to her had pleased or only bewildered her. She remembered how often she had declared to herself and to Floss that she did not mean to get engaged for years, and now—! How would it feel to be bound?

As for Murray, he had no time as yet to regret his rash step. Mrs. Kelly came in, on dusting intent, and he had to account for his presence at this early hour; and then came lunch, to which he remained on no invitation at all.

Here Sylvia made her appearance, looking most demure, with her hair now coiled away smoothly, or as smoothly as it ever would lie on the top of her head. She received him with a fine increase of colour.

After lunch, some of the Egertons put in an appearance, and Murray was carried off to try for a shot on the lake. He had only a few minutes' opportunity of speaking to Sylvia before he left.

They were standing together in the hall, the others having gone on in front. Murray glanced round to see that they were out of sight; then he stooped and kissed her.

"My little sweetheart," he said tenderly, "this is the first chance I have had of speaking to you alone all the afternoon."

"I have wanted a chance," Sylvia said hurriedly;

"I want to ask you to—to say nothing about it to any one for a bit—please!"

Mr. Murray's thoughts had not gone so far ahead, and he was certainly in no hurry to announce the engagement.

He only said: "Why not, Sylvia?"

She hesitated for a moment, with a half-embarrassed laugh.

"To tell you the truth, if you won't be angry," she said reluctantly, "I don't want to be bound—I should hate it!"

And without giving him time for an answer, she quickly slid away from him and walked out of the hall-door, leaving Murray to follow, half-amused and half-annoyed, with a dim idea that perhaps his wishes and hers were pretty nearly the same.

He certainly did not repent that night. He returned to barracks in the evening feeling very happy, and spent a whole hour before he went to bed smoking and thinking of her, and his last waking remembrance was her bright face and dark eyes.

CHAPTER XIII.

CONFIDENCES.

"SYLVIA, come out with me."

Mr. Murray was a decidedly imperious lover, and put his hand on her shoulder in a most proprietary way as they stood in the hall together next morning.

"Aren't you going to fish, then?" she said.

"You know perfectly well I don't care a hang for fishing to-day, or shooting either. I told Egerton I would be over there this morning, and so I will—in an hour or so."

"Well, I suppose I must come," Sylvia answered resignedly; "I sha'n't be a minute putting on my hat."

"Hurry then; stop—give me a kiss first."

"Oh, of course I will!—when some one might come in at any moment."

"You will when I ask you," he said, but Sylvia was too quick for him, and darted upstairs.

She found him in a fine state of sulkiness when she came down, but it did not last long. They went into the grounds, and found themselves a seat, well in the shelter of the trees.

Then Murray spoke to her.

"My darling!" he said passionately, "now I have got you to myself at last!"

"You won't have me for long if you are going to talk nonsense," said Sylvia, in a most practical tone; "we have got plenty of things to talk about, so don't waste time."

She was sitting as near the edge of the old tree trunk they had selected as was consistent with sitting on it at all, and thereby most properly interposing the largest amount of space possible between herself and Murray.

"You are very unkind, Sylvia," he said, drawing a little nearer, and looking at her with some amusement.

"Then you may kiss me once before we begin to talk business," she said relentingly; "there—I did not mean like that! Now," after a pause, "I want to ask you some questions."

"Yes, darling."

"Well, first, Mr. Murray, do you mind my flirting a *little?*

"I mind your calling me Mr. Murray," he said quickly.

"Then—Arthur. I have not had time to get used to it yet, but I think it is a very pretty name. I should have hated you to have an ugly name. Well, tell me; I am not expected never to speak to another man now, am I?"

"You are, I know, a hopeless little flirt," very tenderly—"no, not so long as it isn't *too* much, darling."

"Very well," said Sylvia, in a relieved tone, "then you won't be jealous?"

"I am afraid I can't promise that; I shall be horribly jealous of any one who takes you away from me for a moment.

"I wish you would be sensible and practical," said Sylvia, who perhaps did not object so very much after all; "you talk as if you were going to live here."

"You won't allow me any illusions," said he, half-laughing. "Any more questions? Let me see: my age is twenty-seven—my income is £2,000 a year, plus my pay and a very dilapidated estate in Scotland, and I am absolutely my own master. There—is that practical enough, and don't I deserve a reward?"

"But there is another thing I want to ask you," said Sylvia, a little later. "Must I—am I supposed to—tell you everything?"

"Certainly," he replied promptly; "what are you going to tell me? You have hardly had time to be engaged before!"

"Perhaps," meditatively and half aloud, "I ought to tell him about Jack Dalrymple."

"And who on earth is Jack Dalrymple?" said Mr. Murray, hastily.

"He—he is so nice," answered Sylvia, softly and still half to herself.

"Indeed?" Murray's wrath was rising, and he let her hand go.

"He is awfully good-looking—better looking than you are," in a tone of dispassionate consideration.

"Very likely," stonily; "I suppose you are engaged to him?"

"No—o, not *engaged*," returned Sylvia, in a most

agreeable, conversational tone, "but we have spent some very pleasant days together."

"I am glad to hear it." Murray's tone was ice. "You have omitted as yet to tell me who this paragon is."

"He is the brother of one of the day-boarders at school, and his sister was a great friend of mine. She used to bring me letters from him nearly every day, and I often spent week-ends with them."

"Oh, I see."

"It was such fun," breaking into a laugh; "she used always to leave the letter in my French grammar, and so, when they thought I was busy learning French, I used to read the epistles, and I am afraid I wrote the answers instead of writing my French exercises, very often."

"Very amusing, I am sure," replied Murray, stiffly. "Egerton will be wondering what has become of me; I won't detain you any longer."

Murray was dangerously polite, and, in fact, thoroughly in a temper.

Then Sylvia suddenly turned to him.

"Now," she said, "you are jealous—most abominably, inexcusably jealous! I do hate a jealous man, and I am *very* glad I have found you out in time!"

Murray fairly gasped at having the tables so suddenly turned upon him and finding himself the accused instead of the accuser.

"You are jealous!" Sylvia went on, remorselessly, "and of *Jack Dalrymple!*" in a tone of supreme contempt.

"Well"—Murray only relaxed a very little—"have I not reason to be?"

Then Sylvia's manner changed all at once, and she slid her soft little hand into his.

"Arthur—dear," she said caressingly, "you *know* I would a thousand times rather have you!"

The last lingering remains of Murray's resentment vanished at her words, and there was an interval during which Sylvia made no attempt to be practical.

"Now, don't you admit you were most horrid and disagreeable?" whispered she, a little later.

"But, my sweetheart, you talk of getting letters from this man, and altogether—"

"Are you not going to admit that you have been most disagreeable, Arthur?"

And Murray was so pleased at her using his Christian name for the first time without hesitation, that he was ready to agree to anything.

"But you must tell me about this Dalrymple," he said tenderly.

"You shall hear—everything—if you are nice," she answered, softly stroking the hand which lay in hers; "he was great fun, but I don't care the least bit in the world about him, only it was so slow at school."

"Did you see him often?"

"Yes, rather, but not very often to talk to. I told you he used to write to me."

"Since you left school?"

"Well—twice—" reluctantly, yet with a certain satisfaction.

"And you answered?"

"Yes—his first letter."

"How did you begin?"

"Oh, Arthur, I wish you would stop," she said coaxingly, rubbing her soft cheek up and down against his.

"Tell me, little one," he persisted, but very tenderly.

"Well—'Dear Jack.'"

"Not 'My dear'?"

"No, never, really. Now you are angry again, and I have not told you the worst yet."

"This is pleasant!" said he, rather apprehensively. *What* was coming next?

"Now, I can't tell you, unless you *promise* not to be angry," very persuasively.

"I can't promise," he said.

"Then I won't tell you!" she returned promptly; "you know I need not have told you anything about Jack."

"Well, don't call him 'Jack,' darling, and I promise I won't be angry; I couldn't if I wanted to ever so."

"You are *nice!*" Sylvia nestled close to him, laid her curly head on his shoulder so that he could not see her face, and began to twist one of the buttons of his shooting jacket round and round.

"Arthur—once, he—he kissed me!" she whispered, becoming scarlet to the roots of her hair, and even to the little bit of her neck that Murray could see.

"He kissed you, did he?" her lover repeated angrily; "did you let him, or was it against your will?"

"I did not really—I did not know he was going to. I was very angry. Arthur, it was only once—"

And Murray felt his anger melting away. In five minutes he had been talked over.

"But no one must ever kiss you again, my little sweetheart," he said passionately, "no one but me! And you will not write to him again?"

And Sylvia promised everything.

"And now," he went on again very tenderly, "you have never once told me that you loved me, and I have told you so so often."

CHAPTER XIV.

A MEETING IN THE DARK.

THE next few days passed very quickly to Sylvia and Murray.

Every afternoon, from that first happy day, when Murray had refused to go to Mrs. Carr's tennis, and stayed with Sylvia instead, he came over to Heath Cottage or the Elms, and spent at least an hour in her company, and every day he returned to barracks feeling a little more in love with her than the day before. It was characteristic of the boyishness which still clung to him, in spite of his twenty-seven years and the extent to which he had knocked about the world, that he was sliding into love like any boy of twenty, and with no more thought of the future.

He never said anything to Sylvia about announcing their engagement, and she was quite content with the present.

Of course people talked. Everybody in Delagherty, save and except the Alisons themselves, had heard of Sylvia's escapade on that Sunday, and now gossiped about Murray's constant visits.

The Egertons heard of it, and Harry gave Sylvia the benefit of his opinion as to her proceedings, while

Floss said nothing, because she could not make up her mind to speak to Sylvia on the subject.

Poor Floss!—seeing Murray and Sylvia always together and engrossed with each other was harder than anything else to her, much as she despised herself for caring. Murray and she scarcely exchanged more than a few words now when they met, and Floss made those few words as brief as she could without appearing to avoid him.

Murray's and Sylvia's badly-kept secret would, however, hardly have remained one long, had the former stayed on at Delagherty; but on the 24th, not a week after his proposal to Sylvia, the detachment suddenly received orders for Belfast.

Murray bade Sylvia a hurried farewell, and she was left to feel lonely, though far from inconsolably so, and with some very pleasant reminiscences to cheer her.

Several months passed before they met again. Murray wrote often and very lovingly, but leave was unobtainable, as the riots kept all officers busy.

At last an opportunity came which Sylvia determined not to lose.

Every Hallow-e'en, with the greatest regularity, the Alisons were expected to spend with Mrs. Craven, the Aunt Alice whom Sylvia had gone to see on that eventful Sunday.

But this year that young lady was determined should be an exception as far as she was concerned. She managed it as usual; partly by pleadings, partly by excuses, she contrived to persuade her father to leave her behind, and let her spend the two nights he

would be away with the Egertons. And then she wrote to Murray to be sure to get leave, and to take advantage of Harry Egerton's standing invitation.

Sylvia cared little for Harry's significant observations when Murray's letter arrived, asking if they could take him in on the 30th, if he could manage to get leave. She was so accustomed to everything coming right for her—so accustomed, that she never feared Murray's leave being refused, and was not surprised when he telegraphed to say that he was coming.

She was a very happy girl, when she had seen her father safely off and was free to walk over to the Elms, to find Mr. Murray as comfortably established by the drawing-room fire as if he had never been away. Floss watched their quiet meeting; she saw the tender light in Murray's eyes as he spoke to his little love—saw, too, how Sylvia's fair little face flushed with delight.

And yet, in one way, that young lady's usual good luck seemed to have deserted her that evening. They burnt nuts, and Murray put on two, whose names he refused, with a glance at Sylvia, to tell, and who flamed up furiously; and then the children, led by Harry of course, ducked for apples, and tried to blow out candles, nearly setting the room on fire in their efforts.

But Harry was seized with such intense politeness as to decline to leave Murray for one moment, so he and Sylvia had no chance of speaking to each other, except before the general public.

Once, and once only, they had a few minutes together alone, just before the girls went up to bed.

Floss had lingered behind to get some grease off the carpet, the result of the children's exploits with the candles, and as she came out into the hall she heard Murray, who was lighting Sylvia's candle for her, say in a pleading voice:

"When I have come so far, and have had such hard lines of it this evening. Remember, I have only one day more. Just for once, for a few minutes even."

"I daren't," answered Sylvia, in a low tone, and then Floss went hastily forward.

They both started, and drew apart quickly.

"Good-night, Mr. Murray," said Floss, very quietly; "come along, Sylvia."

But Sylvia lingered for a minute, and whispered something hastily to the young man.

"All right," he said, half-aloud, and then she ran after Floss with a gay "Good-night." Their rooms were next door, and Floss went in with Sylvia for a few minutes.

The latter subsided into a chair, clasping her hands behind her head. She was looking even prettier than usual, and Floss could not help noticing that her eyes were bright with excitement. She felt vaguely and inexplicably uneasy, partly owing to what she had heard, and stood looking silently at Sylvia.

"You mustn't stay long to-night," Sylvia said, after a pause; "I am very tired and sleepy, and not a bit inclined to talk."

"You don't look either tired or sleepy," returned Floss, gravely; "shall I brush your hair for you?"

"No, thank you; I will make very little brushing do to-night, so as to get quickly into bed."

Floss suspected the genuineness of the yawn which accompanied this speech.

She said "Good-night," and went to her room, but she did not undress at once. She sat by her window, looking into the moonlight, and wondering uneasily *what* Sylvia had said she dared not do, and then had seemed to consent to. She knew the girl's recklessness only too well—the utter recklessness and fearlessness of innocence.

Nothing would have offended Sylvia more than to tell her that she was innocent, but Floss understood very well that it was because the girl knew so little, that she did not recognise the harm she was doing herself by the way in which she acted.

Meanwhile Sylvia made no attempt to undress. She smoothed her hair before the glass, then, throwing a shawl round her bare shoulders, she, too, seated herself by her window.

But she did not give herself up to any connected thought at all. Every few minutes she started up excitedly and listened, then sat down again with disappointment.

Almost an hour passed before she did hear anything. Noisily the young men came upstairs, growing quieter when they reached the landing. She heard their subdued "Good-nights," and their doors shut, more or less softly.

Ten minutes later there was a gentle tap at her own door. Gentle as it was, Floss heard it as well as Sylvia, for her ears had been alive too, ever since the young men came up. Sylvia jumped up hastily, and, crossing the room, softly opened the door.

"My darling, I am awfully sorry; I could not get away before. You *are* a darling to have waited up for me."

Murray said this in a passionate whisper, as he drew her to him and held her close.

"I can't stay a minute," she whispered quickly, "I am so terribly afraid of some one coming."

"Don't be foolish, my little sweetheart," he answered, kissing her again and again, "there is no chance of any one coming."

"No; but if they did!—oh, Arthur, do let me go!"

"Shall I"—he hesitated for a moment—"shall I come into your room then, darling, and there will be no danger?"

But even Sylvia was startled by this proposal.

"Oh, no, no, no," she returned nervously, "let me go—oh, Arthur, there is a door opening—"

"Nonsense, my darling," he said; but she was right all the same.

As noiselessly as Sylvia's had done, Floss's door opened, and, a candle in her hand, she stood quietly on the threshold.

Murray let Sylvia go hastily, and the two stood, utterly silenced and dismayed. Then Sylvia went quickly into her room, shutting and locking the door after her.

Murray hastily made a step forward.

"Don't think too badly of me, Miss Egerton," he said.

"*Could* I think too badly of this?" she returned; "Sylvia is reckless, but you—you understand better than she—how *could* you let her risk being caught?"

She turned, and began to close her door, but he came forward.

"Won't you listen to me for just one moment?" he began, humbly.

"No," she answered coldly; "go back to your room, Mr. Murray; there is nothing more to be said."

And she shut her door as quietly as possible, leaving him standing out there in the dark, very thoroughly conscience-stricken and ashamed of himself.

CHAPTER XV.

MURRAY TALKS TO FLOSS, AND SYLVIA TO HER FATHER.

MURRAY was a man who could not bear to be on bad terms with any one, more especially with any girl, and most especially with one for whom he cared as much as he did for Floss.

He fully made up his mind, before he got into bed that night, that he must have a talk with her, and also as to when he would have it.

So next morning, when he was called, instead of turning over and going to sleep again, he got up, dressed as quickly as possible, and went out to where he knew he would find Floss—in the yard with her beloved fowls. After a short search, he discovered her in one of the sheds, busily engaged in feeding a brood of half-grown chickens with porridge and milk, amusedly watching them scatter it all over themselves and each other.

"Oh, you greedy things!" she said, half aloud, with a little laugh; then, hearing Murray's step, she hastily got up.

"Good morning, Miss Egerton," he said, in a decidedly humble and conciliatory tone.

"Good morning," she replied, coldly.

"Can I help you?" with a most deprecating look.

"No, thank you," stiffly, "I must go back to the house."

"After my getting up on purpose to speak to you?"

"Have you anything to say?"

Floss's tone was the reverse of encouraging, but Murray was fully determined upon an explanation.

"You are very angry with me about last night, I know," he said meekly, "and I know I deserve it. But really, Miss Egerton, believe me it was only thoughtlessness—wicked thoughtlessness, if you like."

Floss said nothing, and looked impassive.

"I asked her to speak to me when I came up to bed, without ever thinking; and then, when I found how late it was, I wished I had not, but I knew she would be expecting me, and I could not have left her like that, *could* I?"

"You ought never to have asked her at all."

"I know that. You know I have often told you how I do things on the impulse of the moment. I cannot help myself, really I cannot."

"I have often told you, Mr. Murray, that that is nonsense." Poor Floss; she spoke severely, but it was because she did not dare to speak otherwise—she was afraid of herself.

"You are very hard, but I deserve it," he answered. "I am very sorry; won't you forgive me? You have often forgiven me before."

All Floss's resolution melted away at this allusion to old times. She turned hastily away.

"Don't let us talk of it any more," she said in a low voice, after a moment's pause; "only promise me you will never let it happen again."

"I promise to try," he answered, coming nearer to her; "I don't mean that as a put-off, but I am afraid to promise."

"I can't be friends with you unless you do," she said softly.

"Then I do promise, and I *will* keep it, Miss Egerton. Now we are friends, aren't we? Let's shake hands upon it."

He was quite boyishly jubilant, and they were almost upon the old terms again as they fastened the door of the chickens' cage, hunted for eggs, paid a visit to the calves, and then sauntered up the avenue together, to oversee the getting ready of breakfast.

And Murray insisted on coming to help Floss to make the toast and boil the eggs, which they had only just finished when the gong went for prayers.

Sylvia did not make her appearance till the rest were seated at breakfast, when she came in, looking very pretty and very defiant, and took her seat with a brief "Good morning."

To tell the truth, Miss Sylvia was very much frightened by the events of the night before, and consequently very angry with Murray.

She would have nothing whatever to say to him after breakfast, but ran straight up to her own room, and locked herself in; and after waiting about in hopes of her reappearance, as long as he could find excuses for so doing, Murray went off to shoot with Harry, feeling very much provoked.

Sylvia spent the morning in her own room, being very anxious to avoid meeting Floss; but as lunch time drew near, she began to think that she had punished Murray sufficiently, and that she was punishing herself as well as him. Besides, he would be at the Elms such a short time—it seemed a pity to waste it.

She was making up her mind to go downstairs and see if there was any sign of the shooters' return, when there was a knock at the door, and to her extreme surprise the servant announced that her father was in the drawing-room, and wanted to see her.

Sylvia's first feeling was, characteristically, intense disappointment at the prospect of her stay at the Egertons coming to an end that day instead of the next; then a sudden alarm, lest anything should be wrong with her aunt, seized her, and she ran downstairs.

Her father was standing by the fire, and Sylvia noticed that he was looking very grave. He let her kiss him in silence, and without attempting any return, and answered her questions about her aunt with a brief reply that she was quite well.

"I came home a day sooner than I intended, Sylvia," he continued, "because, I am sorry to say, I have heard some very unpleasant reports about you, and I wish to know from yourself if they are true."

The defiant look returned to Sylvia's pretty face at once; she had expected something of the kind some day, and was not taken wholly by surprise.

"Well, father," she said, "if you tell me what you

have heard, I shall be more likely to be able to answer."

"Is it true that the day you went down to see your Aunt Alice, some weeks ago, you came away by an early train, and spent the interval between that and your return home at Belderry with Mr. Murray?" her father asked sternly.

"Quite true," was all Sylvia answered.

"Then I need hardly ask if the rest is true also;—that you went out boating with him there, went to a private room in a hotel, and drove home with him?"

"It is all perfectly true," Sylvia answered, shortly.

Mr. Alison was very angry. Naturally enough the proceeding seemed to him even worse than it really was, viewing it as he did as a pre-arranged affair, and unable to understand how the excitement of the moment could carry Sylvia away, and how little she realised her rashness.

"I am ashamed of you!" he exclaimed; "you have behaved most disgracefully, and it is no wonder that you and Mr. Murray are the common talk of the country. If you cannot conduct yourself with the commonest propriety when you are left to yourself, I must take care you have no chance of disgracing yourself again. I don't want any fuss to be made, but you certainly shall not remain at the Elms while Mr. Murray is here. You will return home during the afternoon. You can make any excuse you like; being such a dutiful daughter," bitterly, "nobody need be surprised if you say you must come home to me."

Certainly Mr. Alison did not know the way to manage Sylvia. A few loving words would have had

her apologetic and submissive, but she felt he had said more than she deserved, and hardened herself to show no sign of being affected in any way. She watched her father leave the room in sullen silence, looking very unlike her bright, good-tempered self, but when he had gone she could restrain her tears no longer. One thing after another had reduced her to a state of nervous shame she had never known in her life before.

Her one idea was to see Mr. Murray, and she watched anxiously for his return, and ran to meet him when she saw him in the distance, in total oblivion of their coolness of that morning.

Murray was accompanied by a keeper, but he sent him on, while he lingered behind with Sylvia. He was pleased and flattered by her coming to meet him, taking it for granted that she was sorry for her coldness.

But Sylvia waited for no exchange of explanations or forgiveness; she poured out her tale to him, almost incoherent in her haste and distress.

Murray was considerably taken aback. He had hoped that their little adventure was over and done with, and was provoked to find it a subject of annoyance so long after.

"There is only one thing to be done, darling," he said gravely, "you must let me tell your father of our engagement. I can't have any one worrying you now."

And Sylvia assented, gladly, even eagerly.

"I will walk over to Heath Cottage with you after lunch," he added, as they entered the house.

CHAPTER XVI.

PARTING.

"WAIT for me here, little one; I won't be long. Keep up your courage."

And Murray kissed the girl very tenderly as they stood together in the shrubbery.

"Good luck to you, Arthur!" she answered lightly, but his face was grave.

"Don't be too sure of things going right," he said.

But Sylvia was quite sure. Nothing had ever gone wrong with her yet, and she had no fears. Murray's gravity had made no impression on her spirits, which had risen to their usual height.

She waited impatiently for his return, but with absolutely no alarm. Murray had money, she knew, and she had money—so what objection could there be?

It seemed to her a long time before she saw him coming back to her, but even then there was nothing in his face to alarm her. Grave he always looked, and Sylvia had not yet learned to read the expression of his eyes.

She ran forward to meet him.

"Well?" she said impatiently.

"Come and sit down beside me," said Murray, his grave, pleasant voice lower than usual.

And even when they had established themselves on one of the many seats among the trees, Sylvia had time for another impatient "Well, Arthur?" before he spoke.

"Look here, my little girl," he said, "I told you I was afraid everything wouldn't run straight for us."

For the first time Sylvia was alarmed.

"Why, what is the matter?" she cried anxiously.

"Nothing very much, my pet, but—Sylvia," he broke off, "I have never tried to make out to you that I had always kept straight, have I?"

"No, dear," said Sylvia, caressingly and anxiously, "but tell me what is wrong?"

She was divided between alarm and a certain enjoyment of the situation. A dim vista of an adamantine parent, of faithful lovers, and ultimate marriage in the very far distance, all obstacles being triumphantly overcome, presented itself to her.

Sylvia knew nothing of "hope deferred which maketh the heart sick," and felt capable of bearing a short separation from Mr. Murray with great equanimity—with much more than she could have contemplated the idea of immediate marriage.

These thoughts passed rapidly through her head as she spoke; but of course Murray, with his mind full of the desire to give her as little pain as possible, did not guess that his care was not exactly necessary.

"Sylvia, your father does not think I shall make you a good enough husband," he said gently. "I agree with him there, but still—"

"But still, *my* opinion is the chief point," said Sylvia, decisively; "now tell me why?"

Murray reddened.

"That's just the point, darling," he said; "there are things—things a man doesn't care to say to the girl he's engaged to."

"But, Arthur—" she began indignantly.

"I will tell you, if you insist upon it," he answered, "but I will ask you not, dear. Your father can tell you, if he chooses. There's no mystery about it at all," he added hastily—"just I have not always been steady, but with your help, my darling—"

If Murray had not said that he would tell her if she liked, Sylvia would have never rested till he had done so, but as it was, she felt herself in a sort of way put upon her honour not to ask any more questions.

"I suppose," she said softly, "that a man can't tell a girl everything, as she can him."

"I am afraid very few can, my sweetheart," he answered, "and I am not one of the few. You will have to take me a bit on trust, darling—will you?"

And Sylvia, looking more serious than he had ever seen her, answered, "Yes."

"You shall never repent it," he returned passionately; "I can tell you so much, that if I have ever drunk more than was good for me, and played more than I could afford, with your help I hope it will never happen again. Now, are you ready to stick to me, dear?"

"Of course; I have promised," she said softly.

"Then nothing can matter much. Your father has refused his consent to our engagement, but it will all

come right in time, never fear. But I am afraid that after to-day I shall not see you for a long time again."

He kissed her as he spoke, and sitting there together they began to make arrangements and exchange promises—very seriously on the part of Murray, who was always deeply in earnest for the time being, and more than half carelessly on Sylvia's part.

Even when it was time to say good-bye, she was very far from realising what a long good-bye it might mean, and though flattered by her lover's reluctance to leave her, took things very calmly herself.

As for him, he realised it very thoroughly indeed, and felt he had never understood before how much he cared for Sylvia.

It was not the first painful parting this young man had known in his twenty-seven years of life—very far from it!—but he had never found custom make it any less bitter. He knew that he might perhaps never hold her in his arms again, a thought which simply did not enter Sylvia's head.

"Good-bye, and God bless you, my darling," he said passionately; "don't forget me!"

And turning, he walked resolutely away.

Sylvia watched him till his tall figure disappeared among the trees, then she, too, slowly moved away in the direction of the house.

CHAPTER XVII.

AN ADAMANTINE PARENT.

SYLVIA did not see her father till dinner, during which she conducted herself in the most martyr-like manner. She was silent for the most part, but answered, when her father addressed her, sadly but most amiably; she ate very little, even refusing, though with a pang, a second helping of raspberry tart, and looked the picture of hardly-treated submission.

Poor Mr. Alison felt himself a brute, as he ate his own dinner, watched by his daughter's reproachful eyes, and when she rose to go upstairs he could stand it no longer.

"Sylvia, wait for a moment," he said, "I want to speak to you." Never before had such a meek "Yes, father," come from that young lady's lips.

Mr. Alison fidgeted with the dates on his plate, casting furtive glances at the girl's pretty, downcast face.

"I am afraid this is a very foolish business," he began, in an apologetic tone. "I am very sorry to vex you, Sylvia, but I think I have told you before that I should not care for you to have much to do with Mr. Murray."

"I won't hear a word against him!" Sylvia broke in hastily.

"Very well: all I want you to understand is that you are not to be engaged to him."

Sylvia was silent.

"You understand that I won't have correspondence or anything of that sort?"

"I have promised to write to Arthur," replied Sylvia, in what she flattered herself was a tone of mild firmness.

"But I forbid you to do so," her father returned angrily.

"I am sorry, father, but I have promised Arthur to be his wife, so I consider I owe it to him to obey him before any one."

Mr. Alison was hurt by this magnificent speech, and its immediate effect was to make him still more angry and utterly perplexed.

"What am I to do with you!" he said helplessly; "you don't know what you are talking about, Sylvia! Good heavens! at your age you ought to be thinking of your lessons, and not of love affairs!"

He could not possibly have made a more unwise speech; Sylvia's dignity was insulted now, to add to her injured feelings.

"You are most unreasonable, father!" she exclaimed; "you forbid me to be engaged to a man I care for, without even giving me a reason!"

"My dear Sylvia," her father said, with great exasperation, "you refused to hear a word against him just now. Isn't it enough if I tell you that—to put

it plainly—his being drunk at mess is not an occassional occurrence, that—"

"If it happened every night, it would make me all the more anxious to be able to look after him," Sylvia interrupted.

"You don't know what you are talking about, my poor child," Mr. Alison said very truly; "do believe I mean for the best."

"I can't give up Arthur," Sylvia said, but there was a little softening in her voice.

Her father looked at her and sighed.

"My poor little girl. A woman would know what to say to you, for I do not," he muttered, and Sylvia melted at once. "I don't mean to be unkind, and I hate to hurt you."

She got up, and came over to her father, putting her arms round his neck, and rubbing her soft cheek caressingly against his.

"Gov. dear," she said, Mr. Murray's dislike to the word forgotten in her eagerness, "no one could be half as nice as you; and" coaxingly, "you *will* let me be engaged to Arthur?"

"No, I can't agree to that, Sylvia. I am very sorry, but I can't," Mr. Alison answered, and no persuasion could move him further.

But Sylvia, when she bid him good-night, was very far from considering that matters looked hopeless.

She slept very tranquilly indeed that night, and awoke next morning feeling quite like a heroine of romance. Her first proceeding, as soon as she knew Murray must have left the Elms, was to go over there and tell the whole story to Floss.

Floss listened sympathisingly, though very silently; it did not come as a surprise to her.

She was a great deal more sorry for Sylvia than was at all necessary, and between her sympathy, her father's self-reproachful tenderness, and the prospect of Murray's letters, that young lady was by no means ill-content.

She wrote to Murray that afternoon, a far from doleful letter, and no fear of his future unfaithfulness troubled her; she had a great deal too happy a belief in her own attractions to be uneasy.

And yet, had she known a little more about men in general and Mr. Murray in particular, she might not have been quite so placidly confident. But Murray, engaged though he was to Sylvia, had never made her his confessor.

And, on the whole, Murray and Sylvia were the people who worried least about their engagement. Carelessly, and with scarcely a future thought, these two had exchanged promises which should have been only less solemn than those they hoped to exchange some day at the altar.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE MARRIAGE EVE.

MR. ALISON sustained the character of an obdurate parent for precisely six months, and, under the circumstances, that was quite as long as could have been expected.

He gave in gracefully on the 20th of June, Sylvia's nineteenth birthday, rewarded by her kisses and unconcealed delight. And having once yielded so far as to allow an engagement, he was willing to give way altogether, and made no opposition to Murray's desire that the marriage should be soon. There was nothing to wait for, he told Sylvia—who would have preferred to have things remain as they were, free still in a measure, and yet with the constant excitement of Murray's visits. But Mr. Alison did not enjoy Murray's visits so much as his daughter, and strongly objected to feeling himself invariably *de trop* in his own house. He declined to accept her idea of a state of chronic engagement; she must either marry Murray or cease to have anything more to say to him—and Sylvia had no doubt which of the two alternatives she preferred.

So the wedding day was fixed for the 18th of

October, the beginning of Murray's long leave, which would give them two months free to amuse themselves before settling down into married life. Meanwhile, Sylvia proceeded to make the very most of her last days as Miss Alison. Neither she nor Murray had worn the willow during those six months of separation. More than once had Floss, who doubted the constancy of both, wondered at Sylvia, and expected to hear that Murray had been replaced. Above all, when George Egerton came to spend a few weeks at home, did Floss watch Sylvia with astonishment. He and she were inseparable—as inseparable as if Murray had never existed. As for Harry, the little episode which had disturbed his free-and-easy relations with Sylvia had passed unknown to Floss, and was even half forgotten by the other two. He had other and less pleasant things to think of just now, having succeeded in once again failing in his examination. Certainly he made no attempt to act as Murray's rival.

As for Sylvia, she was quite happy, and undisturbed by any fears of unfaithfulness on the part of either Murray or herself. Perhaps, had she understood his character better, had she read his casual allusions to the girls he met with less placidity, and allowed him less latitude in his flirtations, he might have found the tie a burden. As it was, they remained practically truer to each other than many people beginning with a higher ideal of the duties of an engagement might have done, and neither ever knew how near the other had sometimes been to unfaithfulness. They had stuck to each other somehow, perhaps almost because

they expected so little from each other. When the engagement was announced, the whole countryside said much what Floss thought without saying—that it would not come to anything. So time went on, and the 18th of October drew near. Mr. Alison laughed at the idea of Sylvia as a staid matron, and Floss sighed. Sylvia's excitement over her trousseau, and every small detail connected with the wedding itself, puzzled her. Her thoughts seemed so engrossed by these considerations, that she had leisure to look upon Murray as little more than an appendage to all this excitement and preparation. Floss doubted much if she had given any serious thought to her marriage. But, carelessly or seriously undertaken, rash or prudent, the time drew near, September made way for October, and once this month had begun, the days seemed to fly. At last came the evening of the 17th—Sylvia's last evening in her old home. The Egertons all came over to spend it with her, and Murray, of course, who was staying at the Elms, beside other secondary performers in the great event of to-morrow. Outside there was whistling wind and driving rain, offering a doubtful augury for the next day; but nothing damped the merriment of the party by the fire in the drawing-room at Heath Hall; if anything, the dismalness without rather emphasised their cheerfulness by contrast.

Sylvia was the centre of attraction, of course, lying back in a low chair, with the firelight flickering on her fair hair, making herself extremely agreeable to the gentleman who next day was to fill the important office of best man, a fair-haired young fellow of two

or three and thirty, with a pleasant, self-possessed manner.

The year had not changed Sylvia much—she was no less giddy and heedless at nineteen than she had been at eighteen, and her face had not lost its childish, appealing look.

Her grand-aunt sitting next her, stealing loving glances at her darling's face, had grown perceptibly frailer since the days of Sylvia's rash expedition, and Floss had changed a little, but for the better; she looked younger and brighter than she had done a year ago, and some of the primness of her manner had worn off. And besides, there was Harry, as little changed as Sylvia, as boyish, as careless, as occupationless as ever; and Bessy and Kitty and Dicky Egerton, besides a stranger, Nell Dalrymple, a school friend of Sylvia's.

Murray is mentioned last, but he certainly was not the least important of the party.

He stood by the fireplace, his dark eyes sometimes seeking Sylvia's, and, to confess the truth he wished the rest away most sincerely.

But Murray never looked bored, and was always courteous, and had already gained Miss Dalrymple's enthusiastic approval.

"The cake has come," said Sylvia; "who would like to see it?"

Sylvia was not afflicted with shyness on the subject of her marriage, and Floss wondered, half shocked, at her readiness to enter into details about it with or before anybody.

She wondered again now, as Sylvia dispatched

Harry for the cake and oversaw the unpacking of it with deep interest. Murray was shyer about it, and did not come to the front, or make much response when Sylvia called upon him to admire it.

The party broke up soon after. Everybody, except Floss and Miss Dalrymple, was going back to the Elms for the night, and there was a great putting on of coats and collecting of umbrellas in the hall.

And Sylvia had a little private word for everybody.

A chaffing good-night for Captain Crayshaw, "for the last time as Sylvia Alison;" a kiss for the children, even for Dicky, whom she did not love by any means, and a few whispered words with Harry, as he held her hand for a minute.

"Jealous, Harry?"

But his laugh was very heartwhole.

"Not a bit, my dear; I was never very hard hit."

"Mind you have your party in good time then; I trust to Captain Crayshaw to look after Arthur in particular."

And then, very much *sans façon*, she held up her cheek to Arthur to kiss in the dusk of the hall, and found the others had discreetly retired in different directions with admirable promptitude.

"Till to-morrow, my darling!" he said, passionately kissing her.

"Till to-morrow, dear boy; be in good time, and don't get wet going to Heath Hall. You mustn't begin married life with a cold in your head!"

"I am not likely to be late to-morrow," he said tenderly.

"Well, you see, I never *have* known you exactly in

time for anything. Let me fill your pipe for you," and she took it out of his pocket as she spoke. "Now, Arthur, to-night is your last chance of drawing back: are you quite sure you want to marry me?"

And Sylvia leant up against him and looked into his face.

"Do you want my opinion on that subject all over again, little girl?" he said, his dark face full of love; "I wish I could marry you this moment—I hate to leave you now, for fear anything might possibly happen before to-morrow! Oh, my darling—my darling!"

And Sylvia trembled at the passion she had evoked. She gently disengaged herself from his tight clasp.

"There, your pipe is ready, dear," she said; but for once he did not take much interest in his pipe. "Good-night to you, dearest," she said, leaning up to fasten the top button of his coat; and then putting her arms round his neck, she kissed him, smoothing back his dark hair from his forehead.

CHAPTER XIX.

TWO CONVERSATIONS.

SYLVIA had had the best intentions of going to bed early that night, in preparation for the next day, but it was nearer twelve than eleven o'clock when she and Floss found themselves alone in her room, which Floss was to share for the night by special request.

There was her aunt to say good-night to, then her father, who said little, but kissed her very tenderly, and wondered at himself for feeling the prospect of the blank his little daughter would leave so much.

Of course, too, Miss Dalrymple had to be seen to her room, and she and Sylvia exchanged old school reminiscences for some time, beginning by a lengthy message from the melancholy Jack, the subject of Sylvia's first confession to Murray.

And when finally she and Floss were together, Sylvia at first rattled on with nervous gaiety about her presents, the people who had called on her, the breakfast next day, and so on.

"There is one thing," she said: "if Arthur and I are to lose the dancing and the fun, we must at least take some of the cake with us! It looks far too delicious

to leave wholly to all of you. You have got the list of the people to send it to all right, haven't you?"

"Yes, don't bother about that. Miss Dalrymple and I will attend to it."

"Don't forget George is to have nearly all almond paste. Oh, Floss," and Sylvia's voice suddenly quivered, and she came over to Floss, who was brushing her hair before the glass, and laid her hand on her shoulder—"I don't think I want to be married to-morrow."

Floss let the hair-brush fall to the ground with a crash, and in quick alarm put her arm round Sylvia.

"What is it? What is the matter, Sylvia?" she said anxiously.

"I don't know. I think I am afraid, Floss," and Sylvia raised her head and looked eagerly at her companion. "Should you say I am very much in love with Arthur?"

Floss smiled, in spite of herself.

"You ought to know best," she said, "but you certainly have every appearance of being so."

"Do you remember once, ages and ages ago, Floss, I told you I thought Arthur was selfish? Do *you* think he is?"

"That is another question you ought to know the answer to best yourself," said Floss, gravely.

"Well, but tell me. If *you* were in my place, would *you* be content to marry Arthur?"

The time was past when that question would have given Floss pain to answer. She was not the sort of girl to continue to wear the willow for a man who did

not care for her, and she had long ago ceased to take more than a friendly interest in him for Sylvia's sake.

Nevertheless she paused for a moment before answering, with a sudden remembrance of what might have been.

"Sylvia, if I cared for Mr. Murray, or any other man, as a girl ought to care for the man she is going to marry, I think I should believe love would make up for everything."

"And yet you have never been in love, my poor Floss—so what is the good of my asking you! And in any case, *you* would never be not sure whether you were really in love with a man or not, after being engaged for months!"

And then Floss suddenly remembered another part of the conversation they had had long ago, which Sylvia had just alluded to; she remembered how the girl had said that if she married a man she thought she loved, and found herself mistaken, she would not consider herself bound.

"Oh, Sylvia!" she said, "it is not too late yet, if you are not sure. Would you prefer everything to be at an end? Do you really not want to marry Mr. Murray?"

But Sylvia stared at her.

"Not marry him now—when everything is ready! Not marry him, and have every one say I was jilted at the last moment! Are you mad, Floss?"

"But if you do not love him?" Floss persisted.

"Don't be absurd," said Sylvia, fretfully; "I have been talking nonsense, and been ridiculously nervous.

I am going to sleep now, and you will see if I don't want to be married to-morrow!"

And Floss could persuade her to say nothing more.

Meanwhile Murray and Crayshaw were talking of the future too, though scarcely in the same way.

The two had retired to Murray's room, after a smoke with Harry, and leaning out of his window, were indulging in a final pipe.

Crayshaw and Murray had always been fast friends since the latter had joined the regiment, though they were as different as men well could be.

Crayshaw was a steady fellow, very fond of men's sports and society, and caring very little for that of ladies.

Murray and he hunted, shot, yachted, played football and cricket together, and were generally considered very close friends, though Crayshaw seldom went into society.

They were not a very talkative pair as a rule when they were together, and they had smoked in silence for some time before Crayshaw spoke.

"Well, old man," he said, "who would have thought of *your* settling down and marrying!"

"It does seem odd," Murray assented slowly; "on my honour, I can scarcely believe it myself."

"I did not believe you would ever be seriously enough gone on a girl to care to marry her," Crayshaw went on, shaking the ashes out of his pipe.

"Because I have been smitten so often, I suppose. Well, every fellow's time comes some day."

Crayshaw smoked and looked silently at the stars for a few minutes; then he said:

"You will find the difference now, Murray, between caring really for a girl, and simply being gone on one."

"I have taken it harder, if that is what you mean," Murray answered briefly.

"Not that exactly," Crayshaw hesitated—"I meant the real caring which makes you look upon a girl more as a friend—a sweet companion—so as almost to forget everything else. I don't call anything else the real thing."

"I don't agree with you," said Murray, shortly.

Friends as they were, they had never talked in this way before, but Murray had had some idea of Crayshaw's opinions on this subject, had heard him express disgust at some of the stories current after mess, and had never known him speak slightingly of any woman.

He knew the reason too—knew that Crayshaw when they first met had been engaged, and had even seen a photograph of his *fiancée*. She had died a few weeks before they were to have been married, and Crayshaw had gone away while she was ill, and had not returned to the regiment for a long time. And when he did return he never spoke to any one of his trouble; not even Murray had heard him mention the girl's name again, but he knew his friend looked upon all women with reverence for her sake.

There was a short silence after Murray had spoken, then Crayshaw said gravely:

"I am sorry you don't agree with me, old fellow. I thought you might at last, and for your own sake —how do you expect such a love as you have for the girl to last after marriage?'

"I don't care what happens—no, I don't mean that. I do love the girl with all my heart, but not as you mean, Crayshaw."

"Then I don't believe—I beg your pardon, it is none of my business," Crayshaw interrupted himself, "but I'm sorry for the girl, Murray. I remember how I cared—how I care—for the girl I was engaged to." Crayshaw's voice had sunk very low, and he puffed silently away at his pipe for some minutes. "I don't believe I have spoken of her since she died, before," he said, "and I certainly did not think I should ever come to a wedding of my own free choice; nor should I, except to yours."

Murray, manlike, found little to say in response. "I'm glad you came, old fellow," he answered.

"I think before a fellow marries a girl, he ought to care for her, as I cared for Alice," Crayshaw went on reverently. "I have not been any better than other fellows, but I have cared for her as something apart, and looked up to her, and since she died"—he stopped for a moment, but when he went on, his voice was quite steady—"I have kept myself for her sake. It has been till death, and after death for us."

Then there was a long silence. Crayshaw's pipe had gone out, but he did not notice it, and Murray was engrossed with his own thoughts.

Then Crayshaw got up and said "Good-night. You have my best wishes for to-morrow, old fellow," he added.

"Thank you," Murray said, as they shook hands. "I care for the girl as I know how, Crayshaw. Every fellow hasn't the other way in him."

But Crayshaw shook his head.

CHAPTER XX.

TILL DEATH US DO PART.

FLOSS was up next morning before Sylvia was awake, and over at the Elms to see that Bessy and Kitty had their little blue dresses laid out in readiness for them, and to persuade Dicky to promise to be a good boy, and to stay very quiet after his velvet suit was put on.

Then she hastened back to Heath Hall in time for a very rapid breakfast; after which she hurried up to Sylvia's room, to find that young lady very comfortably established in her dressing-gown, with a most substantial breakfast on the table before her.

"Well, Floss," she said gaily, "where have you been? I don't know how you managed to dress without waking me."

Floss came over to her and kissed her.

"I have been home," she said, "to see about the children. You have a lovely morning, Sylvia dear; it must be a good omen."

"Yes; the carpet from the carriage to the church won't be ruined, as it certainly would have been by rain. Floss, would you mind running downstairs, and seeing if you could fish me up a scrap more bacon

from the breakfast-table? It is not the proper thing to be so hungry, is it?"

"It is very sensible of you," returned Floss.

"Just look at my bouquet before you go. Isn't it lovely? I suppose yours is in your room. If you see Arthur before I do, give him a kiss for me—he has shown his good taste."

"I don't suppose he had anything to do with the choosing of them," returned Floss, practically, as she carried off Sylvia's plate.

She met Murray in the hall, where that young gentleman did not seem to have any particular business.

"You most incorrect person," she said, laughing, "what may you be doing here?"

"Well, I wanted to know how Sylvia liked her flowers, and I shouldn't mind seeing her," returned Murray, nonchalantly.

Floss's response was forestalled by Sylvia's voice from upstairs:

"They are lovely, Arthur—thanks ever so much, but I am afraid they won't let me see you."

"Really there is a disagreeable want of etiquette about your proceedings, both of you!" said Floss. "Go back to the Elms, Mr. Murray; you certainly can't see Sylvia at present."

And she left him disconsolate.

Sylvia made a very hearty breakfast, and seemed to have entirely regained her high spirits.

She amused herself by making up flowers for her bridesmaids and a few other favoured individuals, carrying on a lively conversation the whole time.

"There, that will do for Captain Crayshaw, and here's a bunch with an extra bit of maidenhair for Harry. I *wish* my Billy was to be here."

"Poor Billy is quite rent that you did not get married in the holidays," said Floss, who was on her knees before one of Sylvia's trunks, putting a few final touches to the packing.

"Not to speak of his being rent at my getting married at all!" returned Sylvia, laughing. "It is too bad—none of my special admirers are coming to see the last of me. George, for instance—George did like me very much, Floss."

"I have no doubt he did—and does," said Floss, shortly.

"And young Greene—poor Mr. Greene—I think Harry ought to have paid me those gloves we bet about him long ago."

"Isn't he coming?"

"No, he declined, poor fellow; too harrowing to his feelings, I suppose."

"Sylvia, I don't know if you are proud of his caring for you, but you ought to be ashamed," said Floss, hotly; "can't you think of something else on your wedding morning?"

"Can't you abstain from scolding me on my wedding morning, Floss dear?" said Sylvia, pleadingly; "it doesn't feel one bit as if I were to be married to-day. I wonder what I shall feel like this time to-morrow?"

"Very much like yourself, I expect," returned Floss. "I believe you fancy the fact of being married will change you all at once."

"I really believe I do! Now, Floss dear, don't let

me talk any more, but do you please dress quickly, so as to be ready to help me."

And Floss obeyed.

Miss Dalrymple appeared very soon, fully arrayed, and between her and Floss, and a couple of old servants who were determined to assist, Sylvia was very quickly dressed. Mrs. Craven fluttered around on the verge of tears, and succeeded, poor old lady, in being very much in every one's way.

Floss did not think Sylvia had ever looked prettier than she did in her ivory-white dress, her face flushed with excitement, her auburn hair gleaming under her long veil in the October sun, which streamed in through the window.

"How do I look?" she said anxiously; "I am not quite sure that the body exactly fits at the neck. Dear me! how odd it feels to have a train," and Sylvia pushed hers out of her way with a by no means graceful kick.

"My dear Sylvia, you must not do that!" exclaimed Floss in alarm, "you will catch your foot in the lace."

"Very well; I will be as dignified as I know how. I wonder what George would think of me to-day; he always liked me best in white. Yes, I know what that look means, Floss—that I ought to be considering what Arthur will think of me, instead! Nell, stoop for a minute, your hat is not straight. How sweet you look, Aunt. I am afraid if Arthur hopes I may be like you when I grow old, he will be disappointed."

Sylvia rattled on, but there was a good deal of nervousness in it all, and she could not keep still.

Yet, when they came to the church, Murray was far the most uncomfortable of the two, to all appearance.

By Sylvia's special entreaty, both he and Captain Crayshaw were in uniform, and very well did Murray look, with his dark face, and tall erect figure in his close-fitting uniform, his kilt and bare brown knees.

It was a very pretty wedding.

Sylvia's white dress contrasted well with her lover's uniform, and behind, between them and the well-filled church, was Captain Crayshaw, also in uniform, with the bridesmaids, Floss, Miss Dalrymple, and the two little Egertons, in their pale-blue dresses.

The Black Watch colours had been unanimously declared unfitted for trimming of any kind, so the bridesmaids only wore each a tiny bow of the red, green and blue.

There was not a single hitch in the ceremony. Murray was white, but composed, and Sylvia, to all appearance entirely self-possessed.

Captain Crayshaw was as white as Murray, but there was nobody to notice such a secondary performer in the day's proceedings.

And when they went into the vestry, he was among the first to congratulate Sylvia.

Harry, who had gone in after the rest—on what excuse was best known to himself—followed up his congratulations by giving the bride a hearty kiss, considerably to the astonishment both of that young lady herself and of Murray.

But it was later on that Sylvia was in her element, showing people round her presents, spread out in the drawing-room, seeing that every one was attended to,

and immensely enjoying her central position. Murray by no means equally appreciated his.

He did his duty nobly, and spoke to everybody he was requested to attend to, but it was quite perceptible that he wished it all over.

As for Sylvia, after bestowing a little of her society on most of the groups, she ended by joining an extremely merry one, with the bridesmaids and best man as its centre.

She carried Floss off upstairs to help her to change her dress presently, and a few favoured ones soon strayed after them, whereupon Murray considered he had a right to make his own escape good.

Then came the last scene of all, when the whole party of guests assembled round the hall door, and Murray and Sylvia drove off amid showers of rice and old shoes.

And for the first time that day, the two were alone together.

"Oh, Arthur!" said Sylvia, drawing a long breath and nestling close to him.

"Well, little one; are you glad to be married to me?" said he tenderly.

"I don't think I believe it," she said—"to think that I am going away, all alone with you, and no chaperon wanted! Why!" she laughed delightedly, "I am a chaperon myself! Do you think they will call me Mrs. Murray—at the hotel to-night?"

"I should think it extremely probable," returned Arthur; "what else *could* they call you?"

He would have liked her to be a little more serious, though he laughed too.

"There is 'S. M.' on all my boxes, too. I sha'n't know myself as 'Mrs. Murray'—it's perfectly ridiculous, Arthur."

"I don't think it is at all ridiculous, my darling," he answered gravely. "Tell me you are glad to be my wife—my wife: that means a good deal, darling, and is quite serious."

"I am *very* glad to be your wife; I have never been so happy in all my life," she said softly.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE END OF THE HONEYMOON.

A HONEYMOON can be of no interest to any one but the two concerned therein.

Murray and Sylvia were probably quite as foolish as hundreds of other people have been before them, and just as persuaded that no one could take them for anything but an old married couple, while every word and look betrayed the contrary.

They travelled about in France, which was all new to Sylvia, and ended by a fortnight in Paris, which she enjoyed perhaps more than Murray. He knew Paris well, and would have preferred somewhere where he could have had Sylvia more entirely to himself.

And Sylvia's letters to Floss and to her own people were jubilant.

She did not declare herself the happiest girl in the world, nor Arthur the most delightful of men—that was not Sylvia's way; but she wrote animated accounts of all their doings, in which, of course, his name figured largely, and her letters generally ended with a casual remark about him, such as—"Arthur and I still continue to get on really wonderfully," or

"I haven't changed my opinion about Arthur as yet," and a very flourishing "Sylvia Murray" at the end.

And at Christmas the two brought presents from Paris to so many people, that they were requested to say if they intended beginning married life by dissipating their income.

They spent Christmas week at Delagherty, and every one rejoiced to see Sylvia so radiant, and both of them so evidently delighted with each other.

Sylvia enjoyed their stay at Heath Hall very much. She revelled in being made a fuss over, and was delighted to go out to dinner-parties given in her honour, and though Murray grumbled, neither did he dislike it. But he had to be back in Dublin on New Year's day, so these delights could not last long.

They left Delagherty the day before, and reached Dublin in the evening, so New Year's Eve found them established for the first time in their house, for at any rate the immediate future.

It was a pleasant little house in Upper Pembroke Street, within fairly convenient reach of the Royal Barracks, and Sylvia was delighted with it. It was not very large, but, as they said, they did not want a large house—it would not have been half so cosy.

Sylvia spent all her time before dinner exploring each room very thoroughly, and making the acquaintance of the cook, the housemaid, and Murray's regimental servant—all that they could have room for or be bothered with, as Sylvia said when the question of servants was mooted. She did not want a maid for herself, she said with great decision; she had

never been used to one, and would not know what to do with her.

She displayed so much energy before dinner, that she was content to take things more quietly afterwards.

She made Murray pull his chair round to the fire, drew the wine over to his side of the table, fetched him his cigarette case, and then, drawing a stool to his feet, seated herself on it, leant her head against his knee, and slid her hand into his with a sigh of content.

Murray had watched these arrangements with a loving smile, and stroked her fair hair very fondly, when she seated herself at his feet.

"You don't think there is any chance of your servant coming in, Arthur?" she said. "I should never be able to sustain the dignified position of mistress, if I was once discovered like this."

"I hope he knows better," said Murray, sedately.

"What do you think of the cook, Arthur?" began Sylvia; "her name is not pretty—it is Jane; but she is not bad-looking as cooks go, is she?"

"I am afraid I haven't seen her," returned Murray, twisting the wedding-ring on Sylvia's finger round and round.

"Now, really, Arthur, that is culpably negligent on your part. You ought to take more interest in your own house and your own cook."

"I take most interest in my own wife," was all the reply Sylvia's practical observations elicited; and, as to kiss her in her present position would have required a gymnastic effort on his part, he contented himself with raising her hand to his lips.

"Now, Arthur, to think we have been more than six weeks married, and you haven't got over foolishness yet! I am going to have a very busy day to-morrow. I am going to arrange the house exactly as I like."

"And is *my* taste not to be considered at all?"

"Of course you like what I like, silly boy. It is a great comfort you will be away so much to-morrow, as you would be very much in the way. I am going out marketing too, and all sorts of things. You don't suppose any one will call to-morrow afternoon, do you?"

"Well, no, little one, that would be rather quick work, besides its being New Year's Day. You won't be lonely, darling, I hope? I shall be very busy all day, I am afraid."

"Lonely! no, *I* shall be far too busy; I have thousands of things to do!"

"Going to begin the new year well, darling?" he said tenderly; "we must both make a good start, mustn't we? It ought to be a very happy new year for us."

"And it will," said Sylvia, gaily; "I have never been unhappy yet. Shall I write to George Egerton, and ask him to tea or dinner here some day?"

"Let it be tea, then. Don't let us have our evenings broken yet. Don't you think you may as well wait till he calls? Where did you say he was—Beggars' Bush Barracks?"

"Yes; it's a good way from here. However, just as you like."

"What a submissive wife I have got! Invite anyone you like, dear—the whole regiment if it pleases

you—only don't let them interfere with more of our time together than can be helped."

"As if I did not want our time together as much as you! Now, Arthur, if you have finished your cigarette, we might go to *our* drawing-room."

"And we'll watch the new year in—what do you say, my darling?—and make all kinds of resolutions as to how it is to be spent," said Murray, with grave tenderness. "It shall really be a happy new year."

CHAPTER XXII.

HOME AGAIN.

"HULLO, Murray! glad to see you."

"Welcome back, old fellow!"

"How are you, Murray? had a pleasant time?"

Murray found himself meeting and greeting some one fresh at every turn. It was a mixture of arrivals and departures: the return of those officers who had been on first leave, and the departure of those who were going on second.

Everybody was glad to see him, and he found it very pleasant, after all, to be back among his old friends.

Crayshaw, his special chum, did not return till the afternoon.

"Back to the old grind again, Murray," he said cheerfully. "I suppose I needn't ask if you've been enjoying yourself?"

"I only hope you have, half as much, old fellow," returned Murray. "Where have you been—half over the world I suppose?"

"I've been to Russia this time."

"Just like you to choose the winter for Russia," said Murray.

"I don't see what is the good of going to a place except when you can see its characteristics best. How is Mrs. Murray?"

"Looking ever so much the better for our trip. You must come and see her soon, Crayshaw."

"I shall be only too happy. Back again, Were—glad to see you," and the conversation became general.

Murray stuck to his intention of going home for dinner, in spite of the disgust of his brother officers, and their complaints that mess seemed going to the dogs.

He was not going to leave Sylvia by herself that first evening. He had never been so long away from her since their marriage, and he was amused to find how impatient he was to see her again.

Yes, it was good to be married, Murray thought, when he found the door opened before he had time to touch the latch-key, and Sylvia radiantly glad to see him.

"Come upstairs, Arthur," she said; "there is time before we need dress for dinner, and I have *heaps* of news."

And Arthur very willingly allowed himself to be escorted to the drawing-room, where Sylvia had not forgotten to have a bright fire to greet him.

"It does seem so long since this morning," she said, "in the way of missing you, but I have been very happy. Don't you want to hear all that I have been doing?"

"Of course I do; every single thing."

And Sylvia entered into a detailed description of

the day's proceedings. She had been very busy—so busy, in fact, that she had not had time to unpack; she had ordered the dinner, arranged and rearranged the drawing-room several times, and—in fact she did not quite know how the time had gone.

"And then, you see," she added, "I had to go up and change my dress and make myself as nice as I could for *you*, dear. You see, you had never been so long away from me before, and I did not want you to think I had gone off in my appearance!"

Murray's answer to this speech can be imagined.

CHAPTER XXIII.

ALMOST A TIFF.

MURRAY had to leave Sylvia next day also.

The men were to have a great dinner, and each officer was expected to be present to drink the health of his company. Sylvia, however, was full of business as usual, and did not at all object to be left alone.

She wrote home till lunch, after which she determined to devote herself to unpacking.

Murray had been absolutely refused permission to have his clothes unpacked as usual by Lewis, his servant. Sylvia, with one of her sweetest smiles, had assured him that now she was his wife that was *her* business, or at any rate her pleasure; and the sentiment was undeniably excellent.

She began operations by opening all Murray's drawers, and then taking his clothes out of his portmanteau and laying them on the bed. Sylvia was resolved to be systematic.

Consequently she applied herself to the minute examination of his clothes in view of something to mend, and having, to her great gratification, discovered two pair of socks in need of the attention, decided she must first of all devote herself to them.

It was getting dark, so she took them with her to the drawing-room, where the gas had already been lighted, and established herself very comfortably by the fire.

But mending stockings in solitude is dull work, and presently Sylvia's eyes fell on Murray's desk, which had been brought up from his room in barracks. It looked interesting, decidedly, and the possession of his keys was tempting. So Sylvia abandoned the socks, and establishing herself comfortably, if with some want of dignity, full length on the hearthrug, with the desk in front of her, prepared to amuse herself with its contents.

It was not as interesting as she expected at first—a number of mess bills, some from tailors and bootmakers, a half-drawn ordnance map, and a few letters from his brother officers, all tossed in anyhow.

"How like Arthur!" Sylvia thought, "I must really tidy this for him."

And as the preliminary step towards doing so, she upset everything on to the hearthrug.

Then, going on the same system as upstairs, she proceeded to take out a drawer which filled one side of the desk.

This looked more interesting.

There were a good many letters in this, and even an attempt at careful arrangement; there were a few bits of ribbon, a glove, and some withered flowers. "Dear me!" said Sylvia.

She began to think that, on the whole, she had perhaps better not explore any further till Arthur

came home, and content herself with putting the rest of his desk in order.

But curiosity was too much for her.

She was so deep in the first letter she happened to pick up, that the opening of the door made her start.

"Captain Crayshaw."

Sylvia sprang to her feet, letting half a dozen letters slide off her knee and lose themselves among a confusion of bills and regimental papers.

"How do you do, Captain Crayshaw?" she said, in her sweetest tones; "I am *so* glad it is you and not a stranger, for everything is in *such* a mess. You will excuse me when I tell you that I have been engrossed with some ancient love-letters of Arthur's."

Captain Crayshaw laughed.

"Murray is a bold man, or he must have a very clear conscience," he said.

"Oh, I have no permission for my proceedings—in fact, I don't at all know if Arthur will be pleased," said Sylvia, coolly.

"I hope I am not interrupting you?" said Captain Crayshaw, refraining from expressing his doubts as to Arthur's pleasure.

"Not a bit; I am *so* glad to have some one to talk to. Will you ring, Captain Crayshaw, and we will have some tea and be very comfortable."

"I am afraid you must be a little lonely while Murray has to be away so much," Captain Crayshaw said, as he obeyed.

"Oh no, not very. I shall be a little lonely, I expect, the days he goes on guard. You will come and see me sometimes then, won't you?"

"I shall be very glad. Murray's days for guards will soon be over, however, Mrs. Murray. He is the next to get his company."

"That will be splendid!" said Sylvia. "Here comes tea, Captain Crayshaw. May I give you some? I wonder is it worth while keeping it hot for Arthur? Did you happen to see him?"

"The last I saw of him he was being carried round the barrack square in triumph, preceded by the pipers, and I had only just finished enjoying a similar honour. The men are spending the afternoon chairing the officers of their respective companies, being very jubilant after their dinner."

"A doubtful pleasure, I should think," said Sylvia. "Now, Captain Crayshaw, while you are drinking your tea, tell me all you have been doing since I saw you last."

"I think your travels were probably the most interesting," he said. "However, we can exchange ideas."

Captain Crayshaw liked Sylvia. She was amusingly friendly considering their very brief acquaintance, but he liked her all the better for it, and besides, he was anxious to be on the best of terms with Murray's wife.

He succeeded in making himself very agreeable to her, and spending a very pleasant hour in her company, and when he finally rose to go, Sylvia was distinctly sorry.

"You will soon come to see me again, won't you?" she said sweetly.

"Then I shall not find myself disliked and unwel-

come, as husbands' friends are always supposed to be?" said Captain Crayshaw.

"Not if you will be *my* friend too," said Sylvia, graciously.

She returned to the perusal of Murray's letters as soon as Crayshaw had left, and they amused her to the extent of making her forget to attend to the fire, and awake with a start to the fact that it was almost out, when she heard her husband's latch-key.

Murray was not quite pleased. In the first place, he was very cold, and the fire was nearly out; in the second, Sylvia had not come to the door to meet him; and finally, he did not like to see the contents of his desk in wild confusion on the hearthrug.

"My dear Sylvia, you know you are perfectly welcome to read any of my letters," he said, reddening a little all the same; "but you might have waited till I was here, and not made such a confusion."

"I assure you, Arthur, the confusion was awful to begin with. I am going to put it tidy for you," said Sylvia, tranquilly.

"You know nothing about it, my dear girl. It may have looked untidy, but I knew where to get everything I wanted," said he, a little sharply.

"I must say you are a very cool person, Arthur," said Sylvia, serenely. "Instead of being a little ashamed of these letters and tender reminiscences—some of them not so very long ago either—you scold me, and on our second day at home too!"

Arthur was penitent at once.

He was again a little irritated by the condition in

which he found his dressing-room—clothes in every direction.

Sylvia said: "Oh, Arthur, I am very sorry! Captain Crayshaw called, and I forgot all about those things. I intended to have everything so nice for you." And then she troubled her head no more about the matter. Neither did she notice the silence in which he shaved, or that he did not come to her to have his tie tied, as usual.

He had quite regained his good-temper by the time he was dressed, and apologised to Sylvia for having been cross—at which she stared, blissfully unaware of his feelings.

CHAPTER XXIV.

GEORGE EGERTON.

"Oh, George, I am so glad to see you! I caught sight of you from the window, and ran down to meet you."

Sylvia, her fair little face flushed with delight, shook George's hand warmly, and looked half ready to embrace him in her eagerness.

He took matters much more calmly. He was a tall, handsome, languid youth, got up almost to foppishness, with a flower in his buttonhole—George Egerton might be known anywhere by that; winter or summer, no one ever saw him without a flower in his buttonhole—a general air of languor, and an eyeglass.

George never excited himself about anything. He let Sylvia give him a warm welcome, and ended by languidly putting up his eyeglass to survey her. He was not a youth of many words, perhaps because he thought his words too valuable to be wasted.

"Oh, George, why didn't you come to see me before?" went on Sylvia, impetuously, and not at all chilled by his manner, to which she was accustomed. "*Why* did you wait till I wrote? Come upstairs;

I have a lot to say to you, but I have some visitors, and we must wait till they go. I am afraid I forgot all about them."

Captain and Mrs. Atterly upstairs had certainly been a little astonished by their hostess's abrupt departure, and they accepted her apologies with a good deal of concealed amusement.

As for Sylvia, she did not take the slightest trouble to conceal her delight at seeing George Egerton, which, contrasted with the utter tranquillity of the young man himself, amused her visitors very much. However, they discreetly did not stay long, neither did their hostess make any violent effort to detain them.

"Now, George," she said when they were gone, "come and sit over the fire and talk to me. It *is* jolly to see you."

George was accustomed to be worshipped, and liked it. The clever one of the family, he had always come in for plenty of admiration. Perhaps had Sylvia not been brought up with the rest to think there was nobody like George, she might have laughed at, instead of admiring him.

But there hung over him still the glamour of the days in which he being a young man, and she only a little girl, he had condescended to pay her some lazy attentions—or rather to let her attend to him—had read her his verses and expounded his ideas, which were quite beyond her comprehension.

George quite agreed with Sylvia in thinking there was nobody like him. Even his family had been much shaken in their ideas on that subject lately,

and his brother officers were far from being sympathetic souls, so it was pleasant for him to have Sylvia, who believed in him utterly, and to whom he wrote little songs, setting them to music of his own, and dedicating them to her.

He had even gone so far as to imagine himself in love with her last time he had been at home, and perhaps he did care for her as much as he was capable of caring for any one but himself. At any rate, to fancy himself in love with her now gave a little piquancy to their intercourse ; so George sighed, and looked at her admiringly.

"You are not at all changed, Sylvia," he said softly, tossing back his hair from his forehead. This was a favourite trick of his, and, he flattered himself, looked effective.

Before he had entered the army he had worn his hair a little long, and it was one of his grievances that he could not continue to do so. In defiance of all regulations, however, he persisted in shaving his moustache. He knew he was handsome, and considered its growth would greatly detract from the interest of his appearance.

"This room is a pretty shape, Sylvia," was his next remark, when he had transferred his attention from Sylvia to her surroundings ; "but there is a great deal too much colour in it."

"Oh, I must take you all over the house," said Sylvia, eagerly.

"You had better not ; our tastes were never quite the same," said George, sadly, "and you know I always say what I think."

"You know I always do what you advise," said Sylvia, reproachfully. "Tell me, George, have you been writing anything lately?"

"Not much while I was on leave, and now I have come back it is hard to find time. They are a very rough lot of fellows in the regiment, Sylvia, and no sooner do I sit down in my room and think I may be quiet, than there is some row next door, or they bear-fight along the passages. My own room isn't free either. Even at night I have no peace to write."

"You must come and write here," said Sylvia, eagerly.

"You are very kind. I have brought one or two little things to read to you, Sylvia, if," in a melancholy tone, "you care to hear them."

"Of course I care to hear them! You don't imagine I have changed to you, George?" said Sylvia, anxiously.

"But we may be interrupted. Your husband—?"

"He is on guard, which was the reason I particularly wanted you to come to-day, as I was awfully lonely last time."

"Then we will have some time to ourselves." And George extracted a long and much-written-over sheet of paper from his pocket. "I will read some to you, and then I will sing you the last words I set to music."

"Oh, thank you!" said Sylvia, earnestly.

If she suppressed a little feeling of weariness, it was quite unacknowledged. Sylvia would never admit to herself that she occasionally did not quite understand

George's poetry, and had heard something very like his music before.

She sat and listened with all her attention, and warm as were her praises, they were by no means too warm for George, whose power of receiving flattery was unlimited, and Sylvia really meant all she said.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE FIRST QUARREL.

"OH, Arthur, I am so sorry! I was out shopping, and I met George, and he asked me to go up to the Phœnix Park with him to see a golf match, and then we walked about, and he read some of his poetry to me, and I quite forgot the time."

Sylvia ran into the drawing-room, after a very hurried toilet, and went up to kiss Murray, who was standing with his back to the fire, looking rather gloomy.

"It was a nice house to come back to," he said, rather sullenly; "it would have been much better if I had stayed for mess, as they wanted me to. Surely the servants have no business to be all out at once, Sylvia. There was no fire, the gas wasn't lighted, and this room doesn't look as if it had been dusted for a month."

"I suppose they dust it every morning. I will speak about it, if I remember."

"And I wish you would speak to some one about my shirts. I positively can't find one to put on."

"Oh, Arthur! I am afraid that is my fault," exclaimed Sylvia. "I have been bringing them into my

room, and laying them aside to sew buttons on, and I have always forgotten to get buttons."

"I wish you would either not forget so much, or leave all that kind of thing to some one else," he said, with some irritation.

"I am so sorry, dear," caressingly. "If I had not met George, I dare say I should have remembered to get the buttons."

"I really don't see why you need go roaming over the country with Egerton, either."

"Oh, poor George!" said Sylvia, reproachfully, "he has had such hard times of it. Just think, Arthur, there are only five subalterns in his regiment now; all the others are away, and he has duty three times a week, and guard every fifth day! And he hates it so."

"You seem to have forgotten that *I* was on duty three times last week," said Murray.

"Ah! but you and George are quite different. There is the gong, and perhaps your dinner will put you into a better temper, dear."

But the dinner had suffered from waiting, and Murray, who, like most men, liked his dinner, surveyed one dish after another with disgust, though he said nothing.

He made an effort to regain his good-humour when dessert came, and he and Sylvia were left alone.

"That is a new dress, isn't it, dear?" he said cheerfully, and Sylvia was willing enough to accept his overtures.

"Yes; I hope you like it," she said.

"Scarcely as well as the one you used to wear every

evening," he said. "Why haven't you been wearing it lately?"

"Oh, I had it on the last time George was here, and he said it did not suit me," returned Sylvia, tranquilly.

It must be confessed that Murray gave vent to a very hearty "Confound George!"

Sylvia raised her eyebrows.

"What is the matter now?" she said resignedly.

"Do you mean to say you care more for George Egerton's opinion than for mine?" said Murray.

"My dear Arthur, don't be angry. I certainly think George knows more about dress than you do."

"And do you prefer pleasing him?"

"If you think it of so much importance, of course I will wear the dress when we are alone, dear," said Sylvia, soothingly. "It is your dinner which has made you so cross. I am sorry it was cold."

"That's thanks to George Egerton, too," said Murray, angrily.

"It wasn't as bad as the dinner poor George had on Sunday at the Mountjoy Prison guard," said Sylvia, with a laudable intention of changing the conversation. "Nothing hot, poor fellow; lukewarm haggis—greasy cutlets—"

"Can't you talk of anything but George Egerton? I have not the slightest desire to hear what he had for dinner, confound him!"

And Murray actually marched out of the room, leaving Sylvia very much astonished and shocked.

She went upstairs presently to the drawing-room,

and found him fidgeting uncomfortably about the room.

"I told Lewis to bring coffee up here," she said with dignity, and then she took up a book.

It was usually the happiest time of the day for them, when they sat over the fire, Murray on a stool at Sylvia's feet, and discussed the doings of the day; but now he, too, took up a paper, and there was silence.

But he could not read. He fidgeted, and then got up and began to walk about the room, glancing at Sylvia, who read on and never looked up.

And finally Murray gave in. He came to Sylvia and bent over her.

"I am awfully sorry, darling", he said, and she looked up and smiled to him. She was very glad he had been the one to apologise. "You will forgive me for being so cross, won't you, my sweetheart?" he said, kneeling beside her, his arm round her.

"Of course I will forgive you, dear. We will put it all down to the dinner," she said amiably.

"And you won't put George Egerton before me, will you, my darling?" he said tenderly.

"As if I ever did, you silly boy!" said Sylvia, ruffling his dark hair with her fingers.

And then he had to scramble to his feet, with most undignified haste and suspiciously untidy hair, on the entrance of Lewis with the coffee.

CHAPTER XXVI

A STORM.

"THIS is a nice time to come in, Arthur."

For once in her life, Sylvia's usual good-temper seemed to have deserted her, and she did not even take the trouble of looking round to greet her husband.

"I am awfully sorry, darling," said Murray, carelessly.

"I suppose you have had your dinner?" Sylvia went on coldly. "I gave up waiting for you."

"Yes, I dined at the Sheridan with Were. Don't be vexed, my pet; I fully intended being back in good time."

"Did you remember you had promised to take me to the theatre to-night?" said Sylvia.

"Yes; and I intended to be back in time, really, dear. Listen to me, and I will tell you all about it." Murray knelt down on the rug, in his favourite position beside Sylvia, and took her unresponsive hand. "I was awfully busy all the morning. There's a draft of my company going to Malta, and I had to sign a lot of papers, and so on, and then I went into town and got a few ounces of tobacco for each man;

and then I met Were, and he asked me would I drive down to Dollymount with him to have a try for some shooting; and then, when I found how late we were, I thought I'd better dine at the Sheridan, and then I just had a game of billiards afterwards, and wouldn't wait for a second—really I wouldn't."

Murray was in very good spirits, and was not at all sufficiently penitent to please Sylvia.

"And you did not think of me, getting ready to go to the theatre, and waiting and waiting?" she said.

"We'll go another night, darling. I'm very sorry," said Murray.

But Sylvia was very much displeased. She had wanted so much to go to the theatre that night. She had hurried in from a visit to the Atterlys, dressed, had dinner early on purpose, and really it was too provoking. She was determined she would not let Murray think he could treat her so cavalierly with impunity.

Sylvia understood her husband's character just about as well as she had done the first day they met. It never occurred to her that Murray might get tired of rushing home on the chance—for it was not much more than a chance—of finding her the moment his business was over.

Her society had been quite sufficient for him during their honeymoon, and Sylvia did not see why it should not be always so.

It was hard on Murray—harder even than it would have been on most men—to have to account and apologise for every moment he lingered away from her. It was a sacrifice to him, and a totally unappreciated

one, to entirely give up men's society as he had done. He was anxious—very anxious—that his wife should not feel herself lonely, but still he would sometimes have liked to go about with his brother officers.

If he could have persuaded Sylvia to go to the golfing ground with him, or down to Kingstown for a sail, he would not have minded it so much. But generally she had something else to do—she wanted to go shopping, or somebody was coming to call, and she could not go out.

Murray was the very last man to whom a continuance of this kind of life was possible, and if Sylvia had been wise, she would have been glad that his energy had broken out in no worse way than going to shoot at Dollymount. As it was, however, she sagely made up her mind to let Murray see she did not intend to stand such treatment. So next day, when he penitently promised to be home for lunch and take her wherever she liked afterwards, Sylvia purposely delayed, and serenely appeared about four o'clock.

Murray came down to the hall to meet her, and greeted her quite good-humouredly.

"You are just as bad to-day as I was yesterday," he said, laughing. "Madam, I await your apologies."

But Sylvia felt her lesson would be very wanting in effect if she did not explain its meaning.

"You can understand what it is like to be kept waiting now," she said.

"I believe I have experienced the sensation before," returned Murray lightly.

"I did not think there was much need for me to

hurry for you, as you did not hurry for me," she said.

"Sylvia! do you mean to say you kept me waiting on purpose?" Murray started, and drew a little away from her as he spoke.

"Yes, I did," said Sylvia, placidly.

Murray was angry, decidedly angry. "I never thought you would bear malice!" he exclaimed.

"I only wanted to let you see I would not stand being treated in that way," said Sylvia, amiably. "Come upstairs, Arthur, and don't look at me like that."

But instead, Murray took up his hat, and turned away. "Don't expect me back for dinner," he said, and went out of the house, banging the door after him.

Sylvia stood where he had left her, in great surprise, and then went upstairs, shrugging her shoulders, with a condescending pity for Murray's display of temper, and a complacent contrasting of it with her own amiability.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE WAY MURRAY SPENT HIS EVENING.

MURRAY was sorry for his anger before he reached the end of the street, and half disposed to turn back at once, but he finally made up his mind to go on to the Sheridan, and have a game or two of billiards first.

He almost intended to go home for dinner in spite of what he had said, but the acclamation with which the mere idea of his dining at mess was received by a few men from his regiment he happened to come across, made him change his mind.

"There are so few at mess now," said one; "nearly every one is dining out, or married, or on leave, besides poor Wilson down with typhoid."

"It will be better to-night, as it's guest night," said another, "but yesterday, actually Crayshaw and I had the mess to ourselves! I never dined like that before since I joined."

"Yes Murray, you *must* come," some one else added, and Murray yielded.

It was very pleasant to be so warmly welcomed at mess, too; everybody called out a greeting, and they

all drank his health till Murray began to be a little excited.

There were only three guests—a barrister, and a couple of men from another regiment, who were no restraint on their conviviality.

They played whist and poker at first, then they went in for a few rounds with the gloves, and finally, with Murray in the thick of it, they hunted out one of the newly joined, who had shirked the festivities on the inadmissable excuse of a headache.

Murray felt it very like old times to find himself helping the others to make hay in poor Dawson's room, much, no doubt, to the benefit of his headache; and by the time this entertainment had been succeeded by a cock-fight (minus cocks, be it understood), he had almost forgotten that he had ever been married at all.

The others refreshed themselves at intervals during the proceedings, but Murray was ready to drink with any one. Finally, when the guests were gone, and some lively spirits proposed to go down to the Sheridan and end the evening with a rubber or two, he was quite willing, and Crayshaw unintentionally put the final touch to his resolve, by asking if he was going home. Murray had drunk enough to make him obstinate and a little inclined to be quarrelsome, and instantly took it into his head that Crayshaw wished to show him that he ought to go home.

Undoubtedly Crayshaw *did* think so. He was very sorry for Sylvia, but what could he do?

He went to the Sheridan with the others, though, as a rule, a party of half-drunken, excited boys would

have possessed little attraction for him, but Murray played and drank, and Crayshaw could do nothing.

Murray himself was the first to move.

After solemnly playing through a game in which he held the cards upside down, he got up complaining that there was something very odd about them, a fact which he appeared disposed to lay to his partner's charge.

However, he was not anxious to discuss the question, and was quite willing to go home with Crayshaw as the latter proposed. Having got as far as the club steps, however, he sat down, smiling, but refusing to go any further.

Crayshaw paused irresolutely.

"Look here, Murray, you're drunk," he said gravely.

Murray smiled still more, and acknowledged that he was.

"Aren't you ashamed of yourself? Aren't you ashamed to go home to your wife in this condition?"

But Murray only smiled, and said he wasn't going home, and wasn't in any condition.

Crayshaw gave an impatient sigh.

He did not quite know what to do. He thought for a moment of taking Murray to his rooms for the night, but finally gave up the idea. He felt he could not leave his friend's wife to wait probably in great anxiety all night, neither could he well go at two in the morning and call on her, to inform her that her husband was too drunk to go home.

Murray was not in a state to hear reason, so Crayshaw finally decided to put him in a cab, and send him to

his house. He himself would only be in the way, he thought, if he accompanied his friend.

Mrs. Murray must bear her own troubles, poor girl; he could not help her—no one could help her.

Crayshaw put Murray into a cab, gave his address to the driver, and turned away with a sigh.

As for Sylvia, she had her dinner by herself very tranquilly, but her feelings became more and more injured as the evening passed on, and Murray did not make his appearance.

She determined that she really must speak very seriously to him when he came in. He had not been behaving at all well to her lately, and though she was not angry—only vexed, she said to herself, she must make him understand that she could not let such conduct pass, in justice to herself. That there was anything to object to in her treatment of Murray, never entered her head.

She was sorry for herself, and began to fear that her husband was not all that she had thought him—that was all. She was not in the least uneasy, and when twelve o'clock came, and he had not returned, she decided to go to bed, and put off her serious talk with him till the next day. But Sylvia was fond of Murray still.

It was all very well to go to bed, but she did not quite like going to sleep till her forgiveness had been asked and granted. After all, Arthur was always very penitent.

So Sylvia lay with her sleepy violet eyes half shut, and dozed, and woke up again, till at last, as time went on, she began to be vaguely uneasy.

Her ears were very wide awake when the latch-key did at last turn in the door, after a little vague fumbling round it, and she lay very still and listened.

A few uncertain steps in the hall below, and then a fall. Sylvia jumped up in bed with sudden alarm.

Dead silence ensued, which she could not stand for more than a minute.

She sprang out of bed, and ran to the head of the stairs. Murray was lying along the bottom steps, huddled up together very strangely, with his head resting on his arm. Sylvia was thoroughly frightened now; without, to do her justice, one thought of her causes of offence with Murray, she ran downstairs, and threw her arms round him, trying to raise him.

"Oh, Arthur darling, *what* is the matter?" she said. Murray had been asleep, but he raised his head now, and looked at her in serene bewilderment, muttering something unintelligible.

Sylvia knew nothing whatever about drunkenness, but there was no mistaking his expressionless, vacant look, and heavy helplessness.

She was struck with sudden horror and disgust of him—fear of any one in his condition was impossible. She felt herself very forlorn. All the help she could have called, had she wished to do so, was that of two women like herself—Lewis did not sleep in the house.

Besides, her one idea now was that no one must know. This gave her strength to overcome her feeling of repugnance to touching Murray, who had gone tranquilly to sleep again. It took a great deal of urging to persuade him to let himself be helped

upstairs; and worse than all, Sylvia thought, was a sudden affectionate impulse that seized him when he got to his room, and had been a little roused by the exertion. But at last she managed to persuade him to lie down on the sofa in his dressing-room, whereupon he instantly fell asleep again.

And Sylvia, standing there looking at him, burst into tears — tears of disgust with her husband, of intensest pity of herself.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

RECONCILIATION.

MURRAY awoke next morning with a splitting headache, and only a vague recollection of the night before.

It all came back to him gradually.

He found himself on a sofa instead of in bed, and after sleepy surprise at this fact, he also discovered that he was fully dressed and in uniform, and then he suddenly remembered everything. He buried his face in the pillow, and though he was alone, his dark cheek reddened.

How he had got home he had not the vaguest idea, but he had a dim remembrance of having seen Sylvia on his arrival, and, in utter shame and disgust with himself, he felt as if he could scarcely bear to see her again.

But even as he thought so, she appeared at the dressing-room door, fresh and fair as ever, but very grave.

"Are you ready for some breakfast, Arthur?" she said.

She was determined that there should be no possibility of accusing her of failing in her duty. Despise

Arthur as she might and did, she was at least determined to look after his bodily wants.

He sprang up from his reclining position, feeling sick and giddy with the sudden movement.

"Sylvia," he said in a low voice, scarcely daring to look at her, "may I speak to you?"

"Certainly," said Sylvia, gravely, "I only came to ask if you wanted breakfast, but if you have anything to say to me—?"

"Will you sit down?" he said hesitatingly.

Sylvia seated herself on the sofa from which he had risen, but she made no effort to help him to begin. That was not included in her ideas of her duty.

Such a contrast they looked—Sylvia, neat, fresh, and pretty, with her rosy lips firmly set, and a virtuous rigidity about her altogether; Arthur leaning on the arm of the sofa in his crumpled mess-jacket, with his flushed, guilty face and untidy hair.

"I am—ashamed to speak to you," said he in a low voice.

"If you have any excuse to make—?" said Sylvia.

"I have no excuse to make. I have behaved like a brute—no, that is too mild a word for it," said Murray, slowly. "I don't deserve to be near you. I daren't ask you to forgive me."

Sylvia began to relent. Murray was so utterly in the wrong that she could afford to be gracious to him.

"I do forgive you," she said gravely.

"My darling—my darling—you are an angel—" said poor Murray, brokenly.

He knew very well by this time that Sylvia was far

from being an angel, but, for all that, he meant what he said at the moment.

Sylvia was rather disposed to agree with him on the whole. She admired her own magnanimity greatly.

But when Murray, kneeling before her, his dark face hidden, tried to take her into his confidence, as he had never done before, and tell her about his faults and temptations, she was shocked and startled.

"Oh, Arthur—you must not—you must not talk to me about such things!" she said.

Murray was silent for a moment, with a sudden feeling of check and disappointment; then he said, very gently:

"I am sorry if I have shocked you, darling. I only wanted—I wanted to have full confidence between us, and to tell you everything about myself. My darling, don't you think—haven't you felt—that we have been falling away from each other lately?"

"I don't know what you mean," Sylvia returned. "I have not felt anything of the kind, only—you know you have not been quite so nice to me lately."

Murray sighed, and looked wistfully into her serene little face.

"I can't tell you how sorry I am, darling," he said. "It sha'n't happen again. Sylvia, tell me you love me in spite of everything."

Sylvia told him so in her sweetest tone.

And then Murray's spirits rose in a way which she considered showed an utter want of due appreciation of his wrong-doings. She really felt herself bound to remind him, later on, of the evening before, by a slight

allusion to it. And he was very loving and devoted all day.

Sylvia rejoiced at the salutary change in him, and was very kind to him, from a height of superiority, however, which he vaguely felt.

But who could say she had not every right to feel superior to him?

CHAPTER XXIX.

GEORGE WRITES POETRY.

THE next few days passed most serenely.

Murray was exemplary, and quite at Sylvia's beck and call.

He once made a vague suggestion of going down to Malahide with Captain Atterly and Crayshaw to shoot duck by moonlight, but yielded at once to Sylvia's horror at the idea of a whole night with only women in the house.

He even endured George with wonderful placidity, only keeping out of his way as much as possible. His endurance, however, had the reverse of a satisfactory effect.

When Sylvia found that George could come and go without any objection, and that she could talk of him without being snubbed, she did not quite know where to stop.

Murray's patience gave way when, returning one day for lunch, he found Sylvia seated in an almost dark drawing-room, hung round in all directions with curtains of greeny-blue.

Sylvia's offended explanation that this was meant as a pleasant surprise for him soothed him a little,

and restrained him from pulling down the curtains, but he could not be brought to admire George's taste.

The climax came next day.

Murray, coming upstairs three steps at a time on his return from duty, was met by Sylvia at the drawing-room door.

"Hush!" said she, her finger on her lips.

"What on earth is the matter?" exclaimed he, startled.

"Don't speak so loud. George is in there—writing," said Sylvia, mysteriously.

"Well," said Murray, with impatience, "am I to be stopped going into my own drawing-room because a visitor is there? Let me pass, Sylvia."

"Oh, Arthur!" whispered Sylvia, in an agony of anxiety, "*don't* speak so loud—you will disturb him!"

"I don't care whether I do or not. This is absurd, Sylvia."

"Oh, Arthur dear, *do* go down to the dining-room, and I will come to you in a minute. You don't understand."

"I understand that I want an ordnance map out of my desk, for I have got to make out a map of yesterday's march, which I didn't finish at the time."

"I will fetch it for you," Sylvia answered, eagerly. "*Do* go to the dining-room, dear."

And Murray yielded, his meekness being partly owing to his astonishment.

She appeared with his desk in a few minutes, but did not seem disposed to remain.

"I want to hear what is the meaning of this, Sylvia," said Murray, angrily.

"I will tell you all about it afterwards; but I really haven't time now. I must go back."

"Surely you aren't writing too?" said Murray, sarcastically.

But Sylvia answered, in all good faith: "No; but George likes to be played to while he writes. He says it helps him, and I understand him so well."

She made an effort to get away, but Murray held her wrist.

"I think you and Egerton are both mad!" he said. "This is absurd, Sylvia. You shall stay with me, and George must endeavour to write without music. I won't have this kind of thing; do you hear?"

"I can hear without your requiring to shout, Arthur. Of course I must stay if you order me to," said Sylvia, with a resigned shrug of her shoulders.

"I order you simply to choose between me and Egerton," said Murray, sternly.

"That means you want me to give up an old and true friend; the only person I can depend on and put faith in," said Sylvia."

"Am I not your friend? Can't you put faith in me?" said Murray.

"How can you expect me to have faith in *you?*" said Sylvia, sadly.

Murray started and coloured.

"Oh, Sylvia, be a little kinder to me!" he said pleadingly. "*Don't* lose your faith in me, or I won't answer for myself. *Don't* tell me you believe in Egerton and not in me!"

There were actually tears in his dark eyes, and

Sylvia penitently threw her arms round his neck and kissed him.

"Don't be vexed, Arthur dear," she said softly.

"I am not vexed with you, but with myself," he said. "Sylvia, my darling, if you fail me I shall go to the devil. I am afraid of myself—if you don't believe in me, I shall lose all faith in myself," he ended, wistfully.

And Sylvia was very sweet to him, but utterly obdurate in what concerned George. She could not and would not change her behaviour towards him.

And all Arthur could gain, among many caresses and loving words, was that he should not be invited often to occupy the drawing-room, and, above all, that if any visitors called they were not to be informed that Mrs. Murray was engaged in playing to Mr. Egerton and could not be disturbed.

"You see, darling, *I* know I can trust you," said Murray, tenderly, "but it *would* sound a little odd."

CHAPTER XXX.

HARRY.

HARRY was coming to Dublin.

Great was Sylvia's delight at the news. She heard it in a letter from Floss, declining an invitation to herself; and though Sylvia was much disappointed by her refusal, she had more than half expected it, and Harry's coming was a quite unthought of delight.

Sylvia knew very well that for Floss to get away from home was almost an impossibility, but all the same she was very anxious for her to come to Dublin.

In her match-making little brain she had formed the idea of marrying Crayshaw, a great favourite of hers, to Floss, quite regardless of the fact that the two had already met, without feeling any violent attraction for each other.

It was too provoking of Fate to throw obstacles in the way of this scheme for the benefit of everybody, and reduce Sylvia to be contented with talking to Captain Crayshaw of Floss, and writing to her of him, to an extent that considerably surprised them, not being in the secret.

However, Harry's coming was considerably better than nothing, and though Murray had had so much of

one member of the Egerton family lately that he scarcely welcomed the idea of another as much as he would once have done, still he consented readily enough that Harry should be asked to stay with them for a while till he could look out lodgings for himself.

He was going to have one more trial for the Civil Service, preceded by a few months' cramming in Dublin, as home study had not been found very successful.

As for Harry himself, he was jubilant at the idea. He had never been to Dublin before, and it would be a splendid outing for him, he wrote to Sylvia.

It *was* good to see the honest, ugly, home face again, Sylvia thought when he came.

He himself was in wild spirits. *He*, at least, failed in nothing to respond to her welcome, and they went upstairs, talking as if they had had only five minutes to spend together.

Harry did not like the dusk of the drawing-room at all better than Murray had done.

"Dear me, Sylvia," he said, "do you and Murray prefer to live like owls?"

But then he forgot about it in telling her all the news, and talking about what he intended to do.

"I am not going to the crammers for a week, Sylvia," he said. "You see, I want to see as much as I can of Dublin, as I have never seen it before."

"People will laugh at you if you talk like that," said Sylvia.

"I don't care if they do," he returned stoutly. "I want to see the Park and the Four Courts, and all sorts of things."

"Good gracious, Harry, you are going to turn out a regular country cousin on my hands!" said Sylvia, laughing. "You shall see everything. Arthur is going to take you to dine at mess to-morrow night, and the night after I am having a tiny dinner-party in your honour."

"That will be jolly. I have never dined at mess except at Delagherty, and that isn't much. Who is coming to dinner, Sylvia?"

"Nobody you know, except the Atterlys, and George, of course."

"And when are we going to the theatre?"

"Oh, I don't know. To-night, if you like, if Arthur is home early enough and there are tickets to be had."

And Harry's delight amused her very much.

He was eager to be about something at once, and Sylvia was obliged to yield so far as to take him for a walk through the streets, where he was interested in everything, and did not even despise shop-windows.

CHAPTER XXXI.

HARRY MAKES HIMSELF DISAGREEABLE.

HARRY enjoyed himself to the full next day. He was anxious to see everything, except his crammer, and do everything, except look for lodgings.

He was highly delighted when the evening came, and he and Murray went off together to dine at mess.

Mess at Delagherty had not been a very lively affair. There were too few men there, and too many of those few were seniors. But here Harry was in his element.

He sat next Murray, of course, but by the time dinner was over had struck up an acquaintance with everybody near him.

He amused them all highly. *Blasé* boys, three or four years younger than himself, were much entertained to hear all Harry had not seen or done.

He did not mind being laughed at in the very slightest, and towards the end of the evening he was a tremendous favourite all round, and had accepted dozens of invitations, to shoot (about which he *did* know something), play golf, go to the theatre, dine at the club, and so on.

And later still, when the guests and a good many

others had left, and the rest sat round the fire and began to tell stories, Harry found there were one or two other things in which the youngest subaltern there had the advantage—if such it was to be considered—of him.

If he had been wise, he would have kept this fact to himself, but Harry was not very wise. There was at once a general desire to enlighten him, in which his objections were overruled.

To do Murray justice, he had nothing to say to this, but he made no attempt to interfere when Harry was carried off half resisting. They were both home, however, before two o'clock; Harry wiser, and if not sadder, a little more subdued for his evening's experiences.

Next morning at breakfast he had, however, fully regained his careless high spirits. He was enthusiastic on the subject of regimental life, and said that if he had not been too old he would have dropped the Civil Service at once, and gone in for the army.

Murray laughed, but Sylvia was indignant.

"I am very glad you are too old, Harry," she said impatiently. "I believe you have no sense at all. Getting into the army is not so easy as all that."

"I'll tell you one thing," said Harry, tranquilly; "if I fail in the Civil, I shall enlist."

"I shouldn't advise that," returned Murray.

"Oh, a gentleman will always rise quickly," remarked Harry, confidently.

As he appeared to consider he knew more about the matter than Murray, the latter said nothing in reply; but Sylvia began an indignant remonstrance.

"You need not say any more," interrupted Harry; "if I fail, I shall enlist. I have quite made up my mind."

"Since last night, I suppose," cried Sylvia, resignedly.

Remonstrance with Harry she knew to be useless. She struck, however, at his next proposal, that he should learn the bagpipes.

"Even if *I* could bear it, Harry, think of the people next door—it's impossible."

"Only the small chanter, Sylvia," Harry pleaded, "it doesn't make much noise; and then I shall have some lessons."

"What do you know about small chanters, you ridiculous boy!" said Sylvia; while Murray only laughed. "You will have plenty to do without learning the bagpipes. Are you going, Arthur?"

"Yes, I must be off. Will you walk up to the golf-ground this afternoon, Sylvia? I am thinking of having a few rounds."

"I am afraid I can't go. George said he would call in the afternoon."

Murray said no more, and did not attempt to press her in any way. George's name was enough for him. He had said all he could to her about receiving him so often, and told her clearly enough what he had no doubt people said about the matter; but Sylvia had only said she would never give up a friend for fear of gossip, and from this noble standpoint nothing could move her.

Murray could not, and would not, ask George to pay his wife less frequent visits. So he received

Sylvia's placid words in dead silence, a silence which surprised Harry, quite unconscious of any reason for it.

"I'll go up, Murray," he said, "and have my first lesson. How does he play, Sylvia? Shall I have a good instructor?"

"I am sure I don't know," Sylvia returned, tranquilly; "I have never seen him play."

"Oh!" was all Harry said; but he looked very hard at Sylvia.

"I have promised to play with one of your fellows to-morrow—I am sure I don't know his name," Harry went on after a pause; "so perhaps I had better have an idea of the game first. If you're going to barracks now, Murray, I'll walk up with you."

"Oh, but Harry, *when* are you going to your crammer's?" suggested Sylvia, anxiously.

"I told you I wasn't going near him for a week. Besides, I don't know that I care much about this exam. now. I almost think I would sooner enlist."

"Oh, Harry! you would try the patience of a saint!" cried Sylvia.

"And you are by no means a saint, my dear," returned Harry, imperturbably.

CHAPTER XXXII.

HARRY MAKES HIMSELF STILL MORE DISAGREEABLE.

THERE was rather a difficulty about ladies for the dinner that evening.

Sylvia had become intimately acquainted with most of the officers in the regiment, but she knew their wives only very slightly. She never had become, or cared to become, very intimate with other women, with the notable exception of Floss, whom she had known all her life.

However, there was Mrs. Atterly, and Major Rutledge's wife and two nieces; so, as the party was a small one, they managed very well.

Sylvia expended a great deal of anxiety on the knotty point of how her guests were to go in to dinner. Major Rutledge's military rank was of course higher than Captain Crayshaw's, but then the latter was the Honourable; so Sylvia was much perplexed as to which ought to have the honour of taking her in. There was no question about the ladies, fortunately, Mrs. Rutledge undoubtedly taking precedence of Mrs. Atterly.

Harry had the pleasure of taking in the youngest

and prettiest Miss Rutledge, and made himself immensely agreeable to her during dinner. In the evening he devoted himself to Mrs. Rutledge, and Sylvia heard him confiding to her his purpose in coming to Dublin, his desire to learn the bagpipes, and various other little facts, much to her amusement.

She was a stout, motherly old person, and much flattered by Harry's attentions; and as for that youth himself, he honestly thought her charming.

Mrs. Atterly, a faded but still handsome woman, about whom a good many stories were current in barracks, appropriated Murray.

Sylvia knew there had been a time when he, in his usual headlong fashion, had thought there was no one in the world like Mrs. Atterly, and looked on with some amusement. And neither Murray nor Mrs. Atterly had forgotten it either.

Altogether, everybody was pleased, and Sylvia's first dinner-party was a great success.

Harry, in particular, was highly delighted with all the Rutledges, and had already got so far as to promise them a visit on their next at-home day.

Sylvia sighed, as every hour seemed to make the crammer fade still further into the distance. In fact, Harry was as impracticable to work with for her as she was for Murray.

Harry's next few days were very busy—very busy indeed. He never had a moment to spare among all the people whose acquaintance he had struck up.

Of course he called on the Rutledges, with a promptitude which amused Sylvia, and probably

amused them too; and then he was tremendous friends with all the Black Watch officers, and most of George's regiment as well.

What troubled Sylvia chiefly was an acquaintance he had struck up at a tobacconist's. Harry had been accustomed to know all the shopkeepers and tradespeople about Delagherty, and did not in the least see why he should not do the same in Dublin. He assured Sylvia his friends the McCurdys were charming; Mr. McCurdy was so very civil, and quite a gentleman in his manners.

Murray only laughed at Sylvia's dismay, and said he might have found worse friends for himself, and they would do him no harm.

And whenever Harry had a spare moment, he employed it in studying Sylvia and Murray with a puzzled curiosity. He wondered if all married people took as little interest in each other as Sylvia seemed to do in her husband, and presently he wondered too if they all took as much interest in somebody else.

Harry had been several days in Dublin before he happened to come upon and interrupt one of George and Sylvia's *séances*.

Sylvia, on the alert as usual, had time to rush out and hush him at the drawing-room door; but Harry was not so easily subdued as Murray.

"Writing, is he?" he said; "and what are *you* doing? Playing to him? I never heard such nonsense!"

"Do go downstairs, Harry dear, and don't interrupt," said Sylvia, under her breath.

"Playing to him indeed!—*I'll* play to him!" exclaimed Harry.

He had neither the awkwardness of the position of host, nor the anxiety of avoiding a quarrel with Sylvia to restrain him, and pushed past her without ceremony.

George got up on his entrance, but did not move.

"Good evening, George," said Harry, cheerfully. "Sylvia has a little too much to do to play for you all day; but if I can be of any use? If you would care for the bagpipes, or even the piano"—and Harry struck a false chord which made his brother shudder.

"Oh, Harry!" cried Sylvia, in distress. "It was *not* my fault, George; he *would* come in."

"It doesn't matter at all," said George, with resigned melancholy. "I am accustomed to it, and very much obliged to you, Sylvia."

"Harry, *do* go away—please, dear Harry!" urged Sylvia.

"I'm sure I don't see why I should," returned he, tranquilly seating himself. "Why shouldn't I be played to as well as George? I believe, I do really believe I might then be inspired too!"

"Don't trouble yourself, Sylvia, my dear," said George, loftily. "I could not go on now. My ideas are disturbed. I will come again another day."

"I am *not* driving you away, George, I hope?" said Harry, politely—"at least you will read me something you have written first?"

But George took no notice of him further than a cold nod, and left the room, followed by Sylvia in great distress, leaving Harry triumphant.

He was not the least penitent, either, when she returned, and her reproachful "Oh, Harry, how *could* you?" only made him laugh.

"I hope I have not lost some precious lines to posterity," he said. "Sylvia, you *are* a funny girl."

"You don't understand George—how *could* you?" said Sylvia, sadly.

"Sylvia," said Harry, "don't be a little fool! I really think conceit has sent George off his head, and the more you flatter him up the worse he will get. Why, his name is never out of your mouth!"

"I only wish you were like him," said Sylvia, mournfully.

"Heaven forbid!" exclaimed Harry, hastily and fervently. "One lunatic in a family is enough!"

"That is a *very* nice way to speak of your brother," said Sylvia.

"May I ask what Murray says to these dark interviews?"

"Arthur does not interfere," said Sylvia, coldly.

"But, all the same, I don't suppose he likes it. Sylvia, though you don't seem to think so, Murray is worth a dozen of George, with his affectations and ladylike ways. And yet you take the deepest interest in George—in me—in every one *except* Murray, it seems to me."

"Oh, nonsense!" said Sylvia, hastily.

"It is all very well to say that; but *do* you take any interest in Murray?" persisted Harry.

"Of *course* I should if anything serious concerned him," returned Sylvia, indignantly. "You don't

expect me to get excited over his golf, or his boxing, or his billiards?"

"Well, I don't know. I think *I* should, if I was married to you."

"But as you are not, can't you leave Arthur's concerns to him to look after?"

But Harry's only response was, "Ah, Sylvia, I am very glad—I have often been very glad in these last few days—that you would not have me when I asked you long ago."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE EIGHTEENTH OF MARCH.

AFTER this day, Sylvia was not as sorry as she would otherwise have been when Harry did at last establish himself in lodgings about a fortnight later.

She did not at all care to feel that he noticed every remark she made to Murray, and every time George's name occurred in the conversation.

Besides, though it was all very well for him to become utterly devoted to the Rutledges one and all, his friend the tobacconist was too much of a good thing, especially as Harry was urgent he should be asked to afternoon tea. *Such* a nice man; he was certain Sylvia would like him if she only knew him, and *quite* a gentleman.

Sylvia had no doubt that Mr. McCurdy would be asked to tea in Harry's lodgings, and perhaps the whole family.

Still, there was a blank in the house when he went, and she missed him wonderfully.

Murray was not very much at home now, but he was always ready with a good and sufficient excuse. These were very busy times, he declared, and though Sylvia rather wondered that, now leave was

over, there should be apparently even more to be done than before, she accepted his excuses in all good faith.

He was very loving and tender while with her—more so than he had ever been; and if he did sometimes speak to her with a sudden sharpness which surprised her, he was always instantly sorry and ashamed of himself.

And one evening he came in early in a different mood. It was some time now since he had come to sit at Sylvia's feet in the drawing-room after dinner, as he had once always done. Harry's visit had broken off the habit, and they had not resumed it.

But this evening he came over at once, and settled himself in his old attitude. Sylvia was a little surprised, but she put down her book at once, and smiled at him.

"Do you know that this is the eighteenth of March, Sylvia?" said Murray, softly, 'and we have been married five months to-day."

"So we have. It seems longer than that, doesn't it?"

"I have been thinking a good deal this afternoon," went on Murray, in his deep, grave voice, "and, Sylvia, I have been wondering are we any closer together than we were then? We should be, darling."

"Then I suppose we are," said Sylvia, lightly; "we get on very well, don't we, dear?"

"Not as I once thought—hoped we would," said Murray, in a low voice.

"Oh, one has always absurd romantic ideas which couldn't possibly be realised," said Sylvia, twisting

his hair round her fingers as his head rested against her knee.

"I don't see why they should not be realised," said he earnestly; "but oh, Sylvia, it is my fault. I have been untrue to you!"

"What!" cried Sylvia, starting.

"Oh, no! not that!" he answered quickly—"only in thought, my darling—nothing more, I swear to you."

There was a short pause, and then Murray went on in a low tone:

"I made up my mind to tell you everything to-day, dear, and start afresh. First—will you forgive me, darling?—the excuses I made to you about my being busy have not always been true—I could have been more with you."

"Arthur!" was all Sylvia said, but she drew away from him quickly. Her vanity was wounded, and that was a very sensitive part of Sylvia's organisation.

"Yes, dear, I have often been to the club in the evenings when I might have been here, and I have played and lost a good deal, Sylvia. Not more than I can afford to pay, but still, more than is pleasant to think of."

Sylvia was utterly astounded. She had accepted all Murray's excuses without a single doubt, and never for an instant had imagined that he was perhaps not so busy as he had declared. She made no attempt to speak, however, and he went on:

"Rightly or wrongly, I don't think so badly of all this as of my having been so often to the Atterlys'."

"The Atterlys'! What do you mean?" said Sylvia, hastily.

"I mean I have been there—often—sometimes alone with—her," said Murray, slowly. "You know I cared once—and sometimes I have felt—only for a moment—untrue to you."

"Yes?" said Sylvia, under her breath, as he paused.

"That is all," he answered. "I have nothing more to say, Sylvia. That is the worst—if you can forgive me?"

"Is that all?" said Sylvia, so relieved as to be almost pleased. It was like him to make such a fuss about nothing.

She was serenely confident in Murray's love. It never occurred to her that it might change, or grow less, or that her own conduct towards him might have anything to do with its cessation or continuance. She was not in the least jealous of Mrs. Atterly, or any one else.

"You foolish boy!" she said carelessly, "you frightened me. Don't go so much to the Atterlys' if you think you had better not."

Murray was hurt at being taken so lightly. It had cost him a good deal to say what he had said to Sylvia, and she did not seem to think anything of it.

"Sylvia," he said earnestly, "if you would care a little more—if you would take a little more interest in what concerns me, it would be different. Darling, do let us try if we can't be more to each other. Let us agree both to give up a little."

Sylvia was touched by his eagerness.

"Yes, you are right, dear; we will try," she said, and Murray kissed her hand passionately.

"Look here, darling," he said, "would you mind—what would you think if I were to leave the army? Anything would be better for me than this kind of life, and we might live at home, and I could make farming my business."

But Sylvia's horrified exclamation, "Leave the army! Oh, Arthur, you *don't* mean it?" was enough for him. He did not persist, perhaps because he did not really want it himself.

"It shall be as you like, only it would be safer, dear," he said. "This is a bad sort of life for a fellow like me."

"Really, I hope you are enough of a man to stand against a little temptation," said Sylvia.

"I will, my darling—I will try," he answered. "I will give up—Mrs. Atterly; I will keep out of her way carefully: and you, won't you in return give up George Egerton?"

But Sylvia froze at once.

"I have answered you that question often enough," she said coldly. "I will *not* give up George. Because you find Mrs. Atterly dangerous for you, there is no reason I should give up *my* friend."

Murray sprang to his feet.

"Then I have just this to say: I won't stand your giving any further opening to gossip, and I forbid you to ask him to the house!" he exclaimed.

"Then of course I must obey," said Sylvia, stonily.

"Or to have anything further to do with him."

"That I will not promise."

"Not if I order you?"

"No," was all she answered.

"The fact is, you prefer him to me!"

"Certainly I have more reason to care for him. You have several times made me wish I had never seen you," said Sylvia.

She had no idea of the effect her only half-meant speech would have. The anger in her husband's eyes changed to pain, and he grew rather white.

"Oh, Sylvia!" was all he said, with a heavy sigh which broke down her coldness at once.

But, loving though she might be, Murray could not forget what she had said, or that she had given him no promise about George.

That evening seemed to have only made them further apart, and though Murray did try to be more at home during the next few days, when he was there they had not much to say to each other.

Besides, he really *was* busy now.

Spring drills had begun, and with early parade at seven, and four separate hours a day drill, he found his time very much cut up.

It seemed scarcely worth while to go home between times; the Atterlys' was much nearer, and Mrs. Atterly gave him a warmer welcome than he was likely to get from Sylvia. Besides, as he told himself to soften his conscience, Sylvia did not mind his going there in the least.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A LULL BEFORE THE STORM.

"NOW, Sylvia, am I not virtuous to come home so early?"

"You shall have a special kiss for it—though, after all, eleven is not so very early."

"Yes, but I left in the middle of tremendous excitement. They are all dancing reels."

Murray had seated himself in the now rarely occupied position at Sylvia's feet, and looked up at her with something like the old loving expression in his eyes.

There had been neither explanation nor reconciliation, but somehow this night the two felt more as they had done long ago than had been the case for some time.

Murray was pleased with himself for coming home when he had not felt particularly inclined to do so, and consequently in the humour to be the same with every one else. Sylvia was pleased with him, and always on the best of terms with herself.

"Had you an amusing evening?" she said amiably. She had special reasons for wishing to make herself agreeable to her husband to-night.

"A very lively one, anyway," returned Murray, with a laugh. "To begin with, I was let in for liquor all round for coming into the anteroom improperly dressed; that is to say, in full uniform without my skeindhu."

"They noticed that, did they?" said Sylvia.

"Indeed they did. Not a very big omission, was it?"

Murray was highly pleased by Sylvia's interest. He would have been rather given to telling her all the events of the day, had he received encouragement to do so. He went on talking now with boyish eagerness.

"We had a great joke to-night over a letter I found lying on the floor in the anteroom. I looked at the beginning to see who it belonged to, and what do you think I found? It began 'My dearest darling,' so I didn't read any more."

"Very embarrassing for the owner," said Sylvia, which was sufficient to show she was attending.

"I should think so. Of course there was an awful lot of chaff about it, and everybody looked at everybody else to see who was blushing, and Rutledge, the most correct and much married of men, was accused of it. Finally I stuck it up on the notice-board, and he will be a bold man who claims it, unless he has the room to himself."

"I hope you never left *my* letters about," said Sylvia, laughing.

"Not I, my darling. Not that I believe they ever began as nicely," said Murray, tenderly.

Sylvia's attention was beginning to flag, and she

was anxious to come to a little project of her own about the reception of which she was rather doubtful. She began to beat round the bush a little.

"What about Punchestown, Arthur? Shall you be on guard?"

"That is just the question which is agitating us all. We certainly furnish the guards one day, and the great point is, who will be let in for them. It lies between me and Seymour for the Castle guard, and it's just a toss-up."

"George Egerton wants us to go down on their drag," said Sylvia.

Murray frowned, as he generally did when George's name was mentioned.

"You see you told me you would not be taking down a drag," went on Sylvia; "it would be twice as much fun to go in a party like that. The Atterlys are going."

"Sylvia!" said Murray.

"Well, if you aren't on guard we can go, can't we, dear?" said Sylvia, sweetly.

"But if I am on guard you certainly can't go," he returned, speaking a little sharply.

Somehow the introduction of the Atterlys' name just then had annoyed him.

Sylvia said nothing. Even she herself was not at all sure that she could go then.

CHAPTER XXXV.

PUNCHESTOWN.

LUCKILY there was no occasion for dispute, for Murray was not on guard. Neither did he display any inclination to decline George's invitation, nor show displeasure when the latter managed to arrange that Sylvia should sit next him. Murray had established himself beside Mrs. Atterly, so what cared he?

They were a very well-assorted party on the whole. Harry, who was taking one of his numerous holidays, was, in the absence of the Miss Rutledges, making himself extremely agreeable to a very pretty girl in blue, and everybody else seemed fairly contented with their positions.

Certainly to neither Sylvia nor Murray did the drive seem too long.

At Punchestown there was no change of companionship. It was not to be expected that George should care for racing, and he did not; he neither wanted to bet nor to look on, except as much as Sylvia liked, and the latter was much flattered by his going there at all. He had not omitted to inform her that her society was the sole attraction for him.

As for Murray, he forgot Sylvia, George, even

Captain Atterly for the time being, and thought of nothing but his companion. The rest of the party might as well have been miles away for all the attention he paid them.

He, who usually took the deepest and keenest interest in everything connected with racing, was absolutely sorry as they drew near the stand.

He broke the spell himself. What he said he never quite remembered, but it startled him far more than Mrs. Atterly.

It wakened him all in a moment to what he was doing, and he blushed crimson with sudden shame and self-contempt. Mrs. Atterly was surprised when he left her with an abrupt apology, surprised and offended as well, but he scarcely knew what he was doing.

Sylvia and George were a few steps behind, but had he wished to join them he would undoubtedly have found himself *de trop.* He looked at Sylvia with her pretty, shallow face, her bright, untroubled eyes, and the confidence of youth about her every movement, and wondered how he could look at her so coolly, with his mind so utterly full of some one else.

And yet Murray was not in the least in love with Mrs. Atterly, and he knew he was not.

She knew it too—knew that there was passion, not love, in his dark eyes when he looked at her, and perhaps wished for the days when if he had cared for her wrongfully it had at least been truly.

Not that she had ever loved Murray. Mrs. Atterly would not have been able to play with fire as she had

done safely again and again if she had ever allowed herself to care for her slaves. She was a little annoyed by his abrupt departure, and by the loss of a handsome, amusing companion, whose devotion flattered her, but nothing more.

As for him, he never came near his party the rest of the day, but wandered about with different men he knew, betting a great deal, and drinking more than he realised.

It was with a shock of dismay that he found himself dazed and unsteady when the time for departure came. He remembered afterwards how anxiously he had asked his companion if he was drunk, and how angrily he had received the truthful response.

The rest was never more than a misty recollection to him: how he went to the drag, insisted on sitting next Sylvia, said something—something insulting he knew it had been—to George, how Sylvia shrank from him, and how this hurt him even in his dazed condition.

Then George had told her not to be frightened, he would let no one hurt her; and presently Murray found himself standing alone on the grass, watching the drag disappear from sight along the dusty road.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

UNDER ARREST.

MURRAY never came home that night, half to Sylvia's dismay, half to her relief.

It was George who reassured her next morning, and persuaded her to go to Punchestown again as had been arranged.

Sylvia in her shame, and with some little glimmering of wisdom, had almost made up her mind she would not go, but she was easily over-persuaded.

There would be plenty of other ladies, George said, so why should she lose the pleasure, and his arguments were assisted by the remembrance of Sylvia's very prettiest dress, fresh and unworn in her room upstairs. She had carefully reserved it for this day, and now it would be such a pity not to wear it.

Undeniably some of the ladies were surprised to see her, especially Mrs. Atterly, who said she was *so* pleased Mrs. Murray had been able to come; she had scarcely ventured to hope—

Mrs. Atterly was suffering from wounded vanity as well as Sylvia, and this was her way of giving vent to it. As for Harry, he told Sylvia very plainly that she was a fool to come; but then, with George beside her, she very soon forgot a few unpleasant words.

She had a delightful day, and almost managed to forget Murray. Only once she happened to come across him, as she went with George into his regiment's luncheon tent.

He walked past her arm-in-arm with some other man, his eyes dazed and his steps unsteady, and recognising her with a start, he took off his hat a moment later, with a weak, deprecatory smile, and a lurch against his companion.

Sylvia turned away with disgust.

She felt very frightened and forlorn when George said good-night to her that evening.

"It is so lonely, George," she said, and she began to cry, quick, frightened, childlike sobs.

George liked the position of comforter very much. He did not in the least desire to seriously compromise either Sylvia or himself, and would have opened his eyes considerably at the idea of outraging propriety in any violent manner, but this position of platonic friend, who was yet a little more than a friend, suited him admirably. So he left her, not ill-pleased with things in general, and promised readily enough to come and see her again next morning.

And he did come, the next, and the next after that, for Murray did not come home.

How those days passed, Arthur Murray never quite knew. He remembered afterwards losing a good deal of money in bets, drinking a good deal, and then in the evenings at the Sheridan playing and losing still more. Whether he ever went to bed, and if so how and where, were doubtful points in his memory, but he supposed he must have slept in some of his brother-

officers' rooms, already so well crowded with guests that one more or less did not make much difference.

Harry sought him out, and tried to remonstrate with him once; Crayshaw did the same, but with little hope of success; he had known Murray twice before long years ago in one of these gambling and drinking fits, and he understood how useless words were.

And one day Murray put the finishing touch to his course of wicked recklessness.

He awakened as from a dream to find himself under arrest for being drunk on parade.

Drunk on parade. Murray was sobered in a moment by the shock of disgrace. Even as he walked slowly away he began to realise everything. It was a very bad business indeed, he knew that. Leave the army he must, there would be no choice now.

And Sylvia? For the first time he saw in its true colours his behaviour towards this girl he had married, and promised to make happy.

Crayshaw, whom he met on his way to his room, received a very different greeting from those he had been accustomed to lately.

"It's all up with me, Crayshaw," Murray said, when he had told him everything in a few hurried, shamed words; "will you tell Sylvia—will you tell her?"

Crayshaw was dismayed. It was not a very easy or pleasant task certainly, and he was *not*, after all, very intimate with his friend's wife.

"Don't let her hear it from any one else," went on Murray, hurriedly; "there is nothing to be said for me, but you won't use more hard words than you must."

"But—" Crayshaw began.

Murray interrupted him.

"Ask her, beg her not to think more hardly of me than she can help. Tell her I must see her—she must not refuse to see me—after the court-martial. You will go to-day, won't you?"

Murray's agitation was the more terrible for being repressed, and Crayshaw did not know how to refuse.

They parted at Murray's room door, and Crayshaw walked sadly away on his unpleasant errand.

And as for Murray, he sat in his room, dazed and stunned. It was when the adjutant, greatly disliking his mission, came for his sword, that Murray first thoroughly realised matters.

When he was alone again he stood still where he was by his window, looking vaguely out into the square without seeing anything.

Ruined, disgraced, turned out of the army, with unpaid gambling debts, to what amount he knew not. What a fool and a brute he had been!

And Sylvia? Could she ever forgive him, could he expect her to take him back, disgraced as he was?

Characteristically, and perhaps naturally, Murray now even exaggerated the extent of his own wrong-doing.

He thought of Sylvia's cold little face, and her want of comprehension, and sighed heavily.

He would not allow to himself what a difference a little more kindness, a little more interest, on her part might have made. Murray, whatever his faults, was not the sort of man to shelter himself under a plea of that kind.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

CRAYSHAW'S MESSAGE.

CRAYSHAW was not in at all a happy frame of mind, as he walked up Pembroke Street, on his way to fulfil his friend's difficult request.

In the first place, he was very unhappy about Murray, who he had always liked better than any man in the regiment, caring for him more than he might have done had he not been such a lonely man himself. As a young subaltern had once said of the two: "Murray is a very good fellow, but there are lots of men like him in the world, and very few like Crayshaw." Still Murray had a frank, pleasant manner which made him many friends.

He had been a very good comrade to Crayshaw too, with all his faults—staunch and true; and with his energy, his high spirits, and his unfailing good-nature, Crayshaw thought the regiment would be very strange and dull without him.

Perhaps it was as well he had not much time to regret Murray just then, being obliged to exercise his mind with the awkward question of what he was to say to Mrs. Murray.

How was he to go and announce to a woman he,

after all, knew only in society that her husband was under arrest for drunkenness?

Crayshaw was not naturally bashful, but he walked once or twice backwards and forwards before the house before he could make up his mind to knock. Then when he had done so, he almost hoped Sylvia would be out.

But no such escape awaited him. He found himself in the drawing-room, with Sylvia coming to meet him, a little surprised and startled in the long absence of her husband by a morning visit from his friend, before he had at all made up his mind what to say.

The words "Is anything wrong?" were on her lips, and would have been a great relief to Crayshaw; but she restrained them, feeling they would be awkward, if he really only meant to pay her a visit.

Crayshaw could talk no commonplaces just then. He plunged into the subject that had brought him there at once.

"Mrs. Murray, I have a message to give you from your husband," he said.

"Is anything the matter?" exclaimed Sylvia.

"I am afraid so. At least—don't be frightened, he is all right," Crayshaw interrupted himself.

Sylvia's face hardened at once. If Murray was not ill, she would not display any undue amount of excitement about him after his treatment of her.

"What is it then?" she said coldly.

"The fact of the matter is, he is under arrest," said Crayshaw, abruptly.

Sylvia flushed and started.

"Under arrest—what for?" she said.

Crayshaw tried by a multiplicity of words to put things as well as possible.

"Well, the truth is—you see Murray hasn't been—you know yourself, Mrs. Murray, he—he is awfully sorry, and hopes you will forgive him. He—you know how strict we are about how the officers come on parade, and Murray—he wasn't quite sober, to put it plainly, Mrs. Murray."

There was silence.

Crayshaw stood looking as if he had been confessing his own sins, not Murray's, and Sylvia, after one quick, startled glance at him, did not raise her eyes again.

"And that means—? What will be done to him?" she said at last.

"I am afraid he will have to leave the army," answered Crayshaw, slowly, "but perhaps—there will be a court-martial next week."

"He sent you to tell me this?" said Sylvia.

"Yes; he is miserable, poor fellow. You won't be too hard on him?" urged Crayshaw. "Won't you give me a message for him?"

"If you see him," said Sylvia, slowly—"I don't know whether you can see him, but if you do, tell him I shall leave Dublin. That is all."

"Nothing but that?" said Crayshaw, anxiously. "Won't you at least wait till after the court-martial, and see him before you go? Mrs. Murray, forgive me if I seem rude or presuming, but I know Murray, and I am afraid to think what will become of him if you leave him like that."

"Very well. Tell him I will wait and see him," said

Sylvia, but so coldly that Crayshaw doubted if he had done much good.

He left her as soon as he could, seeing he could do no more for his friend, and when she was alone, Sylvia burst into angry, frightened tears.

Her first idea was to go to George at once. She could not stand being alone any longer, and he cared for her—he would tell her what to do. With all her theoretical love of independence, Sylvia was very far from liking the reality of it.

But a few moments' consideration showed even Sylvia the impossibility of her going to Beggars' Bush Barracks in search of George. She must content herself with writing to him instead. And a very hurried, confused little note was dispatched, begging him to come to her *at once*. But George was on guard, and consequently unable to obey till next day.

Sylvia was half wild with loneliness and longing for some one to tell her troubles to by that time, and received him with a fervour of joy which a little alarmed him. He drew back slightly, but Sylvia was not a very observant person, and did not remark the suspicion of coolness in his manner.

However, he was ready to come and see her as often as she liked, and even, on pressure, to promise not to write home about Murray's arrest. Sylvia took the matter in a personal way which astonished him, and in her shame would have liked, had it been possible, to hide it from all the world; but instead of that, every one must know sooner or later.

Sylvia might confine herself for the present to writing to her father offering a visit, but when she

arrived at home, she knew very well her explanation must be given.

George would have persuaded her to go home at once, but Sylvia was determined to keep the promise she had made to Murray through Captain Crayshaw, and to see him once more. So George paid her almost daily visits, and wrote a poem with mysteriously veiled allusions to himself, Sylvia, and Murray, and would have done anything else which was not very troublesome for her, had there been anything else to do. Harry came to see her too, full of hot indignation with Murray, and apologies, serenely accepted by Sylvia, for having ever thought the coolness between the husband and wife was her fault.

Altogether, Sylvia began to feel herself quite a heroine.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

AFTER THE COURT-MARTIAL.

THAT week passed very slowly to both Sylvia and Murray, and it was a relief even to him when the day of his court-martial arrived.

George came to tell Sylvia all about it the day before, and that it was his regiment who were to furnish the court-martial, even—and this part of it she did not like at all—that he was to be one of the officers to try Murray. It seemed to Sylvia a most unpleasant and almost unnatural arrangement, but at least it would enable her to know the result as soon as possible.

Not that any one had much doubt of the result except Sylvia, who still retained a faint hope, and made George faithfully promise to come to her immediately the court-martial was over.

As for Murray, he knew very well what to expect, and only longed for it all to be over.

They were all sorry for him, his five judges, even George. Each of them could remember some pleasant, jovial evening spent with him when he had been in the thick of all the fun. If they had seen less of him since his marriage, he had at least been as friendly as

ever when they met, and some of them had been to see him in his new home and been received by Sylvia with all her graciousness.

But all the same there could be no doubt about the question.

Murray remained throughout very white and grave, speaking as little as possible, and he gave a sigh of relief when it was all over.

Crayshaw had not come to the court-martial, but he was waiting about outside to speak to Murray, and, taking him by the arm, he drew him away with him.

"Come to my room, Murray," he said.

Murray made neither objection nor resistance, he did not even speak till they reached his companion's rooms, when he drew away a little from Crayshaw, and walked over to the fireplace, where he stood, leaning against the mantelpiece.

"Well," he said roughly, "it's all up now, so I may go home and hang myself if I like."

"I suppose you are going home at once?" said Crayshaw.

"I don't know," said Murray, shortly.

"Mrs. Murray will expect you, I am sure," said Crayshaw.

"Do you think so?" said Murray, with sudden eagerness. "What did she say to you, Crayshaw, when you saw her? I want you to tell me everything, exactly."

"You must remember, when I saw her, she had only just heard—she had had no time to think," Crayshaw began, and then he told Murray as well as he could what Sylvia had said to him.

Murray listened eagerly, but without her looks and tones, how could he judge of what hope might be gathered from Sylvia's few words?

"I feel as if I scarcely *could* ask her to forgive me," he said, with a catch in his breath.

"If it would not be the best thing for her as well as you, you might say that," said Crayshaw, gravely.

"You do think—you are sure—it would be the best for her?" said Murray, anxiously.

"I am certain of it," returned Crayshaw.

"The fact is," said Murray, after a pause, "I ought never to have married, Crayshaw. I was not fit to be married. I don't believe you thought I was at the time."

"Those are subjects on which we do not agree," answered Crayshaw; "this much I do think, that you, of all people, required to be doubly sure of caring for the girl you married."

"I doubt if anything would have kept me straight," said Murray; "I am not very old yet, Crayshaw, but I wish I had married five or six years ago. I believe I could really have cared for a girl then, Crayshaw. I have been an awful brute to her. Unfaithful—unkind—and the worst of it is, I can't—I *can't* even feel sure of the future."

"If she forgives you now, Murray, you must never let her repent it," said Crayshaw, earnestly.

"I will do my best, at any rate," said Murray, in a depressed tone. "It is men like you who should marry, Crayshaw, not fellows like me. I make good resolutions, and then, without thinking, I drink a glass more than is good for me, or yield to a sudden

impulse of passion, and it's all up, and all my resolutions go to the wall. It's just a case of falling back again and again."

And Murray's voice sank, and he turned away.

"There is no good talking like this," said Crayshaw, quickly; "you must make a fresh start now, and not think of what is over and can't be altered, in this morbid way."

"I have made so many fresh starts," said Murray, with a faint smile.

"To begin with, you have no business to delay going to your wife," went on Crayshaw; "she has a right to expect you to go to her at once."

"To tell you the truth, I am a regular coward about that," said Murray, hesitating.

"There is no good in putting it off. You will not be content till she has forgiven you," said Crayshaw.

"Then you think she will forgive me?" said Murray, eagerly.

"I am sure she will, as she loves you," said Crayshaw.

"Then I don't care a d—n for anything else!" exclaimed Murray, with rather an unsteady laugh. "Good-bye, Crayshaw; you have put some life into me, old man, and thank you for it."

And he shook his friend's hand warmly.

"Good-bye, old fellow," returned Crayshaw; "don't think I have been preaching to you. I have had the luck to have had something to keep me straight, and you haven't, that's all."

His voice had changed and grown reverent, as it always did when he made any allusion, however

remote, to his engagement, and he did not speak again till after a short pause.

"We shall miss you very much in the regiment, Murray," he said, "and I shall specially miss you."

"Thanks to my own confounded idiotcy," said Murray; "but perhaps it is just as well, after all."

CHAPTER XXXIX.

HIS LAST CHANCE.

MURRAY walked rapidly through the streets, without allowing himself time for thought or hesitation.

He did not even pause before putting his latch-key into his door, and turning it, he walked quickly across the hall, and upstairs.

His head was in a whirl of excitement, and he opened the drawing-room door, his mind full of incoherent, loving thoughts, and perhaps more capable in that moment of really caring for Sylvia than he had ever been before.

Sylvia and George Egerton were standing by the fire; she was crying, and he held her hand, and looked down at her tenderly as he talked to her.

Murray started. In a moment the glamour which the feeling of his own wrong-doing towards her had thrown over Sylvia faded away, and he remembered her as she was, and knew how very impossible was such a reconciliation as he had hoped for.

The other two had turned round on the opening of the door, but neither of them moved towards Murray; Sylvia even instinctively drew a little closer to her companion.

"So it is you, Arthur," she said coldly.

"Is that all you have to say to me?" said Murray, slowly.

"I heard you wanted to see me," answered Sylvia.

"I do; and Egerton will excuse me," with a bow to that young man, "if I say I should like to speak to you alone."

George looked at Sylvia, as if to gather from her what she wanted him to say; but after all, it was difficult to refuse to leave a man's house when he desired you to do so, so he gently drew his hand away from her clinging fingers.

"Then do our arrangements hold good for to-morrow, Sylvia?" he said.

"Certainly they do. Good-bye for the present," said Sylvia, with a defiant look at Murray.

He stood silently waiting, with compressed lips and lowering brow.

Surely, in spite of everything, these two had no business to treat him as a nonentity in his own house.

He politely escorted George to the hall door, and when he returned, all softness had gone out of his face.

"I am sorry if I have been an interruption, Sylvia," he said coldly, "but may I ask—for remember, I *am* still your husband—if it is an elopement you and Egerton are planning for to-morrow?"

"You have a great deal of assurance to insult me after all that has passed," said Sylvia; "if you are anxious to know, I have made up my mind to go home to-morrow, and George has promised to take me there."

Murray grew white.

"You—are going home?" he said, and there was a long pause.

Then Murray made a few steps forward to where Sylvia was standing by the fire, and took her resisting hands in his.

"My darling, you are not going to throw me off altogether?" he said, in low, urgent tones.

"You can't expect me to live with you after this," said Sylvia, trying to draw away her hands; but he held them fast.

He did not speak for a few minutes, struggling to regain self-command.

"Sylvia," he said at last, steadily enough, "you will at least hear me before you finally decide to grant me no mercy? It is a decision of more than life and death to me, and I have a right to be listened to, at least."

"I will listen," said Sylvia, nervously; "I—I really don't want to be unkind, Arthur, but—"

He let her hands go, and moving back a few steps, he stood before her with bent head.

"I have wronged you very much," he said; "I scarcely have the right to ask you for one more chance, but I do. Oh, my darling!" and his effort at calmness gave away, "can't you forgive me? Think, if it is any excuse, however small, for me, that I have never—never known a home till I married you. I was sent to school a little chap of nine, and there was no one to care whether I kept straight or not? And from then, all my life, before I got into the army and after, it has been the same—

plenty of money, and no one to care how I spent it."

He stopped, looking wistfully at Sylvia, but she did not answer.

She kept her eyes fixed on the ground, and he tried to see some sign of relenting in her silence.

"You don't know—you don't understand—how hard, how desperately hard it is for a fellow like me to keep straight," he went on passionately; "if there had been *any* restraint on me—if I had even had less money to spend—oh, I would give my right hand to blot out some of the years of my life!"

"Oh, I am sorry!" said Sylvia, with a sudden sob.

Murray caught her hands again, kissing them passionately.

"My darling—my darling!" he cried, "I am—not worthy—" and his voice broke.

"It is a great pity," said Sylvia, her quiet tones contrasting strangely with his agitation; "you ought never to have married me."

"I ought not—I ought not!" said Murray, with passionate humility; "but as it is too late—Sylvia, can you take me back?—disgraced, with debts, the paying of which shall never touch *your* comforts, my darling. Give me one chance—only one chance more, Sylvia, and with God's help, I will never give you cause to regret it!"

"Oh, dear me, haven't I told you it is quite impossible," said Sylvia, a little irritated by his unreasonableness; "I will forgive you, but if I were to live with you now, I should never have a moment's peace of mind."

Her pretty face was a little flushed and troubled, and she shed a few tears, half of pity for herself, half for Murray.

She was really very sorry for him, but under the circumstances it was impossible to expect that she should be the one to sacrifice herself. It was all his fault and it was undoubtedly he that ought to suffer in consequence.

Sylvia thought of the loneliness of Murray's estate in Scotland, which he had often described to her, and shuddered at the idea of being thrown almost entirely on his society. Was she to give up for this the pleasures of going home to be pitied, sympathised with, and admired in the character of an ill-used and much-enduring wife, and with constant visits from George to look forward to?

It was really too much to expect, and more, far more, than Murray deserved.

So she cried, and repeated that it was quite impossible.

But Murray was too desperately in earnest to be easily rebuffed.

"One more chance—only one!" he pleaded; "it is my only hope! For God's sake, don't give me up! You had better kill me, for you will kill all the good in me—you will make a devil of me, fit to curse God —to—"

He turned suddenly white, and his voice went, with a quick, choking sob.

Sylvia was shocked at his irreverence, but he did not give her time to speak.

Kneeling at her feet, her hands in his, his passion-

ately pleading eyes fixed on her face, he tried his last chance with the energy of despair.

"Do you think there is no responsibility when you hold a man's soul in your power? Will you answer before God for the wrong you do me, for wrong it will be? I don't know how to touch you—I wish I did! I appeal to you by all you hold most sacred—I appeal to you to have mercy as you hope for mercy, to forgive as you hope to be forgiven! Will you take me back?"

There was a moment's breathless silence. Then Sylvia drew away her hands from Murray's grasp.

"You frighten me!" she said piteously. "Why will you be so selfish—it is quite impossible!"

Murray rose to his feet in dead silence, and with a stunned, hopeless look in his eyes, which gave Sylvia a sudden pang of what she felt to be most unreasonable self-reproach.

"Really, Arthur, you must understand," she said hurriedly—"I forgive you, I am sorry for you; but you cannot expect me to go away with you among strangers *now*. I cannot trust you any longer; I cannot care for you as I used—"

"Don't—say any more," said Murray, in a low, strange voice; "I understand."

But Sylvia found the silence which succeeded very oppressive.

"You will stay here to-night?" she said, with sudden yielding; but he shook his head.

"I will go at once," he said unsteadily, and turned away in a vague, hesitating manner which alarmed her.

She sprang forward and laid her hand on his arm.

"You will kiss me before you go?" she said, with quivering lips.

He put her hand away, but very gently, and looked long and steadily into her face.

"I can't kiss you," he said, "but I can at least say, God bless and keep you, my poor girl, and forgive me for the trouble I have caused you. Whatever you may hear of me, don't think too hardly of me, my darling."

Even at that last moment, Sylvia might have yielded, had it not been for the thought of George—George, and that exciting, delightful journey to be taken next day under his escort.

But instead she stood, hesitating and doubtful, while Murray, with one last lingering look, turned and left her.

She heard the door close behind him with a sudden sinking of heart. She had of her own free will broken her marriage vow, and sent away from her the man for whom she had promised, not six months ago, to forsake all others as long as they both should live. She was very sorry for him indeed, and was it her fault if vague thoughts of George and the exciting prospect of her return to Delagherty came very soon to mingle with her regrets.

As for Murray, he went out into the streets, walking unsteadily, he knew not where.

CHAPTER XL.

ON THE WAY HOME.

SYLVIA was really very unhappy after Murray had left her. She cried heartily, and if she had not had her packing to console her, she would have been thoroughly miserable.

And the evening seemed to her very long, in spite of it. She thought of Murray a good deal, and she was very sorry for him, which she felt to be magnanimous after his treatment of her. But, after all, he had brought his troubles on himself, and was it not hard that she, who was not to blame, should suffer too?

Yet, somehow, in the absence of George's flatteries and delicately expressed sympathy, Sylvia found herself troubled with some uncomfortable, unreasonable doubts about her own conduct. Why had Arthur said such dreadful things to her, spoken to her so unkindly, as if *she* had been to blame?

So Sylvia went to bed in rather an uncheerful frame of mind.

However, next morning things looked brighter. George and she were to meet at the Great Northern station at ten o'clock, so she had not much time to spare before starting. Of course the servants knew

the whole story of Murray's disgrace and Sylvia's parting with him, and there was a sort of mysterious, solemn bustle going on in the house. They were all on Sylvia's side, and tried to show it in every way they could, all except Murray's regimental servant, who had been with him ever since his joining, and had received many kindnesses from him at one time or another. And then he had only to look forward to a return for the present to all the disagreeables of an ordinary private soldier's lot.

Sylvia did not know what arrangements to make about the house, and finally decided to make none. She would write, she said to herself, and till then things might remain as they were.

And then her spirits went up with a run when she found herself alone in a railway carriage with George, all her troubles left behind, it seemed to her.

It was such—fun !

"It is just as if we had eloped, George!" she said; "do you think people will imagine that we have?"

"I hope not," said George, who did not seem to think this particularly funny.

"I feel like a bad little schoolboy, who has played truant," said Sylvia, smiling up into her companion's handsome, languid face, "only there is nobody to scold me."

"And *I* feel," said George, trying to gaze tenderly at Sylvia through his eyeglass, "like a man who finds himself as happy as he can ever expect to be in this world, and would not care if the next moment were to end it all."

But if he had thought there was a likelihood of his

being taken at his word, perhaps he would not have expressed himself so strongly.

"That is very like something in one of your last poems," said Sylvia, calmly, "and I can't say that I feel in such a bad way myself."

"No," said George, "there is not complete sympathy between us yet, but I hope that some day—"

"It is very kind of you, I am sure," said Sylvia, briskly, "but really, if complete sympathy means a wish that I was dead, I would rather decline!"

And then seeing that George was much offended, she became humble and caressing in a moment.

"It is only because it is so funny, so nice, to be running away with you like this," she said soothingly. "You musn't mind my being silly, George. Did you write anything last night? Do let me hear it?"

And half the sympathy which she now gave to George, would have soothed away all the rough places in her own home, and kept Murray from outside temptations.

Altogether it was a delightful journey, and Sylvia was quite surprised to find how soon they reached Delagherty.

Mr. Alison himself met them at the station. He was certainly rather surprised to see George, and a little perplexed altogether about this sudden visit of Sylvia's.

"I had hoped Murray would have been able to come with you, Sylvia," he said, naturally enough, but the awkwardness of the question made that young lady colour a little, and George frown.

And then it was decidedly awkward to meet Mrs Grimshaw on the road, who stopped her carriage to speak to them, and of course asked about Murray, even adding a joking little inquiry as to how Sylvia enjoyed married life. Even Sylvia was aware that she could not proceed to inform Mrs. Grimshaw that she did not like it at all, especially when that piece of information would have to be shouted from carriage to carriage; so she only smiled, and said that Murray was very well, exchanging meanwhile a very expressive glance with George, who was being given a seat home.

He got down at the Elms gate, and then Sylvia felt that the time for explanations could not be put off much longer.

She *did* wait till after dinner, however, with due consideration of the comfort of letting it pass without awkwardness, and though Mr. Alison still felt a little puzzled, yet Sylvia was so exactly as usual, that he began to hope this visit meant nothing more than a freak on her part.

But in due time, when the butler had retired, Sylvia drew her chair round to his side of the table, and without any preliminary remarks, suddenly said, in much the same tone as she might have used in talking of the weather: "Governor, I hope you are glad to see me, for I do not think I shall ever go away any more."

Her father was duly startled.

"Sylvia?" he exclaimed in dismay.

"Yes, father," said Sylvia, leaning up against him in the caressing way which always embarrassed Mr.

Alison, who was not given to caresses, "I must tell you all about it. It has been very unhappy."

And then she told him her story: told it with a few tears, and an increasing perception of her own wrongs. And as she related it, the case seemed very black indeed against Murray. Not that she had any intention of unfairness, but naturally she said nothing of the daily worries, and the aggravation of her obtruded devotion to George. And Mr. Alison was roused to great anger with Murray.

After all, Sylvia was his child, and her wrongs must be first with him. Still, he could have wished her to be more reticent in her blame of Murray, and he himself said no word against him, for was he not her husband?

"I am very sorry about all this, Sylvia," he said; "I will speak of it to-morrow. You know, my dear, you are always most welcome here."

And then he felt that it ought not to have been necessary to tell his only daughter that she was welcome.

CHAPTER XLI.

A GRASS WIDOW.

GEORGE had *his* story to tell at the Elms that evening, and from his manner of relating it, *his rôle* appeared to have been that of guardian angel to a foolish young couple, who could not have got along at all without his assistance. But Floss knew her brother well enough to be aware of the partial light in which he was inclined to view all that concerned himself. She was very unhappy about it: her sympathies were with both the culprits, and perhaps she scarcely agreed with George's view of Sylvia as an injured sufferer.

Was Sylvia blameless? Fond as she was of her, Floss was too well aware how foolish—how very foolish—that young lady could be, to feel at all sure of this.

"Perhaps it is only a quarrel, after all, George," she pleaded. "Is there no chance that it may all come right after awhile?"

"Not if Sylvia has any respect for herself," said George.

But Floss considered herself at liberty to take her own view of the question.

She did not go over to see Sylvia till the afternoon of next day. She was anxious to see her, to try and comfort her in her grief, but she had at the same time an awe of intruding on a trouble so great as it seemed to her Sylvia's must be. She even wondered if the girl would be willing to see her or anybody.

And yet, if she had only known it, Sylvia had projected herself going over to the Elms that afternoon, and had only stayed at home at her father's request. He had come to her before going to business in the morning, and had asked could he do anything for her, in the hope that she would speak of a letter to Murray. It was not till he had waited in vain to see if she would not mention the subject that he had made even this distant allusion to it, and Sylvia only said, "No, thanks; nothing," without remark.

Then he had suggested that she had better stay about the grounds for the day, and that they would have a talk in the evening.

So for once she had obeyed, and found herself very dull in consequence.

Floss got rather a shock when she saw Sylvia running across the lawn to meet her, looking so exactly as usual. She seemed more than half a child, with her serene violet eyes, her soft dimpled face, and her slight figure. She had a basketful of primroses and bluebells in her hand, and a bunch of them in her hat and jacket made her look quite festive; altogether she seemed to Floss so utterly unlike what she had expected, that she began to wonder whether, after all, George's story could possibly be true.

"You dear old Floss! I am so glad to see you!" exclaimed Sylvia, throwing down her basket, and flinging her arms round the other girl's neck. And then she added in a lower tone: "I suppose George has told you all about it? Come into the garden, and we will sit in the summer-house and talk."

"Dear Sylvia, I am very sorry," said Floss, hesitatingly. What words could she use that would not hurt Sylvia?

And then in the summer-house it was Sylvia who did most of the talking, while Floss listened, wondering how she could speak in a way that hurt her only to listen to.

She tried to let there be no sympathy lacking in her voice when she spoke.

"Dear Sylvia," she said, "it is all a great trouble, I know, but you will forgive him, will you not?"

"Oh, yes," said Sylvia, "poor fellow, I am sure I forgive him."

"And—you will not stay away from him long, I suppose?" said Floss, hesitating.

"Floss!" exclaimed Sylvia, "you don't mean to say you think I ought to go back to him?"

"You see, Sylvia," said Floss, softly, "he is your husband."

"And because of that, am I to submit to anything from him—to blame him for nothing?" said Sylvia, sharply.

"No, perhaps not that," said Floss, flushing with her earnestness, "but to forgive, to stand by him if no one else does—it seems to me that is always for the woman, Sylvia."

To forgive, to stand by him—how staunchly Floss felt she could have faced the world in Sylvia's place for—any one she loved.

"It is because you do not understand," said Sylvia, petulantly, pulling a primrose to pieces with restless fingers; "how could you, when you have never been married! Is a girl's life to be spoilt because she has married a man who is—unsteady? Would you have me go back to him to be never sure—how it might be with him?"

"Perhaps I have no right to speak to you like this," said Floss, faltering a little, "but I am so very, very sorry about it all—"

"Just say what you like," said Sylvia, caressingly; "nobody has more right to say things to me than you."

But Floss knew very well that this deceptive sweetness did not mean that Sylvia would be willing to be disapproved of.

"Then I am sure—quite sure you ought to go back to him," she said, resolutely; "he needs you more than ever now, when he is unhappy, and has done wrong. Just think how you would blame yourself if worse were to come of this, when you knew that if you had stayed with him it might have been different."

"Arthur has certainly found a very warm advocate in you," said Sylvia, in a tone of offence. "I do think that, being a girl, and I hope more my friend than his, you might have a little feeling for me! He is old enough to take care of himself, surely, and at any rate I *can't* go back to him to be miserable in his horrid place in Scotland—and I won't!"

And then Floss said no more, doubtful whether she was not doing more harm than good.

But Mr. Alison had also a word to say to his daughter on this subject when he came back from business. She had been on his mind all day, distracting it from account books and loads of timber to an extent which she had never done before during her twenty years of life. He had begun by being wholly indignant with Murray, but after a time it dawned upon him that possibly the wrongs might not be all on his part. At any rate, Sylvia had behaved in a very imprudent manner in this sudden return of hers under George Egerton's escort, and she must certainly go back to Murray, and that before any scandal was aroused if possible. Badly as he had behaved, this was the best, the only possible thing for her to do. She had married the man in spite of opposition, and now she must make the best of it.

But still, Mr. Alison did not wish to be harsh with her. Harshness had brought enough trouble into his life already; had he been less stern, less proudly resentful fourteen years ago, things might have been different—at least, so it had often seemed to him. He would not make the same mistake with his daughter as he had made with his wife. Surely Sylvia would see reason, surely she still cared for the man she had been so determined to marry; but if she did not—if she persisted in refusing to return, what was he to do? Could he dare to take the responsibility of forcing her to go back to her husband, even if Murray were willing to receive her on such terms?

Mr. Alison did not know what he should do, and

there was no one with whom he could consult. His reserve, which was chiefly the result of shyness and partly of habit, had prevented him from having any friend intimate enough to discuss such a subject with. He did think for a moment of his aunt at Kilberry, but remembering how frail and shaken she was, he put that thought aside.

He felt that it was rather hard to have this troublesome daughter—for whom, despite her prettiness and her caressing ways, he had never cared as perhaps he ought—foisted back on his hands, after having been once, to all appearance, satisfactorily disposed of.

And when he came home, and found her flitting about the house as pretty, and to all appearance as serene as ever, he began to feel as if the whole episode of her marriage to Arthur Murray must have been a dream.

It was in vain to expect her to open the subject; as far as Mr. Alison could see, she seemed to consider that everything necessary had been said the evening before, and that it need not be mentioned again. She talked of the Egertons, lamented the sale of her ponies, and interrupted Mr. Alison once, when he had actually opened his mouth to speak to her about Murray, by an inquiry about the fate of her old fishing-rod, as she wanted to go fishing with George and Billy next day.

And it was not till she came to him to say good-night that Mr. Alison had managed to screw up his resolution to the point of remonstrance. There would probably be a scene, and there was nothing in the world that he hated more.

"Sylvia," he said, "wait for a moment; I want to speak to you."

"If it is anything disagreeable, won't it wait till the morning, Gov.?" said Sylvia, pleadingly.

"I had better speak to you now, and get it over. I want to know what you wish me to do about—your husband?"

"About Arthur?" said Sylvia, opening her eyes; "why nothing, Gov. You know I cannot go back to him, and you will not turn me out, will you?"

"My dear child," said Mr. Alison, impatiently, "do you imagine you can drop the whole affair in this way? Do you imagine you can just come home here and live as if you had never been married?"

"I don't see why not, I am sure," said Sylvia; "but if there is anything to be settled about money or anything of that kind, I suppose you will manage for me, won't you?"

"I suppose you know Murray could force you to go back to him if he wished?"

"I am quite sure he won't do that," said Sylvia, tranquilly.

"And I consider you ought to go back to him without any forcing," said Mr. Alison, sharply.

"Go back to him, when he has disgraced me!" exclaimed Sylvia.

"Do you remember what you said to me once when I opposed your marriage with Arthur Murray?" observed Mr. Alison. "You said if he were drunk every night it would make you only the more anxious to be able to look after him."

"And do you remember what you said in answer,

Gov.?" said Sylvia, softly; "you said, 'My poor child, you don't know what you are talking about.' And I didn't."

"But still, the thing is done now," said Mr. Alison in a gentler tone; "he is your husband, and you must go back to him, and the sooner you go the better for both of you."

"You are all against me," said Sylvia, and she began to cry softly—"even you, who are my father."

But though she cried, she yielded not a jot.

"I can't go back—I can't go back!" was all she would say, till at last her father was driven to give way for the present.

CHAPTER XLII.

A DELAGHERTY SCANDAL.

By the next day the whole story, with considerable additions, had reached Delagherty, actually rousing Mrs. Carr to the exertion of driving over to the Egertons' in the morning to ascertain the whole truth of the matter from Floss. And when she arrived, she scarcely waited to be seated before beginning upon the subject.

"Tell me, Floss, is it true, all this disgraceful business about Sylvia Murray?"

And Floss did not know exactly what to say upon the subject.

Sylvia had said nothing of secrecy to her, and if she persisted in her determination not to return to her husband, all attempts to keep the matter from the knowledge of every one would of course be useless. Still, Floss could not bear to relate even the outline of the story to anybody, above all to Mrs. Carr, who had never forgiven Murray for his desertion of Floss, nor Sylvia for having attracted him.

"I don't know what you have heard, so how can I tell if it is true?" she said cautiously.

"I have heard only too much indeed," said Mrs.

Carr, sententiously; "poor girl, I suppose it is in the blood—and such a trouble for you, too!"

"But I don't know what you are talking about," said Floss, honestly a little perplexed. "*What* is in the blood, and *what* is a trouble for me?"

"My dear child, with an old friend like me, and especially when it is half over the place, I don't think you need keep up this affectation of mystery," said Mrs. Carr, huffily.

"Well, if you will, please tell me what you have heard," said Floss.

"My dear, I am afraid it is only too true. Why, Mrs. Grimshaw saw Mr. Alison bringing them back with her own eyes! I dare say your brother wasn't much to blame, if the truth were known; but I always told you harm would come of having her here so often."

"What has my brother got to do with it?" said Floss, desperately. "I suppose you mean George, but I really don't understand."

"Do you mean to tell me, Floss, that Sylvia Murray didn't run away with your brother George," said Mrs. Carr, solemnly, "and that her father hadn't to follow and bring her back? And it is not more than six months since her marriage, too!"

"But I do mean to say that she not only didn't run away with George, but never dreamt of such a thing!" exclaimed Floss. "She was coming home, and so was George, and, considering that they have known each other all their lives, I really think it was very natural he should look after her on the way down."

"Oh, of course, if you choose to deny it—" said

Mrs. Carr, with displeasure. "Perhaps you don't know that she and your brother have been the talk of the military set in Dublin for some time, and that there have been a good many prophecies of this kind of ending. Perhaps it isn't true that all this has caused Mr. Murray to leave the army—?"

"Mr. Murray has left the army, but not for any reason like that," said Floss, colouring; "and Sylvia is at home at present, while Mr. Murray has not settled where he will live—and that is really the whole foundation for this horrid gossip."

And this was strictly true as to words, at least.

But Mrs. Carr was quite unconvinced: she would, of course, have denied an unwillingness to believe that such an exciting bit of scandal, and one which so entirely fulfilled her own prophecies, was unfounded.

"And do you mean to say that there is nothing between her and George?" she said.

And before Floss could answer, a most unfortunate thing happened.

Sylvia and George, sublimely unconscious of the presence of any one, came into the room, Sylvia following George, after a dog-like fashion peculiar to her when with him. "We will be alone here, anyway," said Sylvia, who was the last to perceive that any one was there.

Now this meant no more than that George had a new poem he was most anxious to read to his ever appreciative listener; but, not unnaturally, Mrs. Carr took it up very differently indeed. She bestowed a most chilling glance on the culprits, during which George shook hands with her with serene indifference.

Sylvia certainly fully reciprocated Mrs. Carr's dislike, and if she had known she was in the drawing-room would carefully have avoided her; but it was not in her nature to be anything but agreeable to everybody, and she went up to that lady with quite an air of *empressement*, and with a most friendly smile upon her pretty, childish face.

Mrs. Carr had never been warm in her reception of Sylvia, but still there was no mistaking her present manner. She just touched the tips of Sylvia's fingers, keeping at the furthest possible distance, as if she feared lest she, a virtuous wife, should receive contamination from her approach.

"How is Mr. Murray?" she said icily, and having asked what she considered the most embarrassing question possible, she scarcely waited for a reply before turning her back on the girl, and devoting all her attention to Floss in the most marked manner she could assume.

It was some few minutes before Sylvia understood. Floss could see the different changes of astonishment, perplexity, offence, and dismay passing over her face, and then she turned to George, flushing all over with anger and shame. Her bow was quite as stiff as Mrs. Carr's when that lady rose to say good-bye, emphasising her coldness to Sylvia by kissing Floss warmly.

Floss, in her indignation for Sylvia, left it to George to see her visitor to her carriage, whereas on another occasion she would have gone as well.

And that lady, though her courage seldom failed her, did not feel equal to attack the languid young man, who made no attempt to rouse himself from the

contemplation of his very smart yellow boots through his eyeglass, to bestow anything beyond the most absolutely necessary attention upon her.

All Sylvia said about her was: "I do think Mrs. Carr is the most disagreeable woman in existence!"

And then, while Floss was meditating a remonstrance with much doubt—for, after all, Sylvia was a married woman, and George was not a boy—the two departed together in the most matter-of-course way in the world.

Floss looked after them in perplexity: if it was innocence, Sylvia had no business to be as innocent as that; if it was determined indifference—in any case, George was to blame. Floss did not follow them herself just then, but she sent Billy after them as a kind of chaperon, being aware that that youth was not particularly thin-skinned, nor likely to fancy himself in the way.

As long as they kept in the grounds it was not so bad, but Floss knew Sylvia and George too well to feel at all sure what their next proceedings would be.

CHAPTER XLIII.

BEYOND CONTROL.

If Mrs. Carr had not been able to make up her mind to speak to George on the subject of his relations with Sylvia, she had not at all the same hesitation with Mr. Egerton, senior, who was by no means such an imposing person as his gifted son.

She met him the very next day on the Delagherty road, sauntering leisurely home from his club, and proceeded immediately to disturb the unlucky man's comfort for at least the next hour or so.

She was driving, but her carriage was at once ordered to stop, and Mr. Egerton had the delinquencies of his son and Mrs. Murray, and her undesirableness as a companion for Floss, poured into his ear in a mysterious whisper. After all, she need scarcely have taken the trouble to whisper, as her coachman knew quite as much of the subject as she did, if not more.

Mr. Egerton was very much annoyed. Why on earth hadn't George married Sylvia long ago, if he had wanted to, when, putting everything else aside, her money would have made her a most acceptable daughter-in-law to Mr. Egerton? He had had the

chance, and as he had not chosen to take it, there was really no excuse for his proceeding to make a scandal in Delagherty.

So having succeeded in making himself very angry before he reached home, he relieved his feelings by scolding Floss.

"If you had a little more thoughtfulness and consideration," he said, "you would see that it doesn't do to have the girl over here so often. It's disgraceful to have this sort of gossip going on, and I won't have you mixed up in it; do you hear?"

"Yes, papa," said Floss, sadly, "it is the greatest pity; but I don't know what to do. I don't like to tell Sylvia that she is not to come over here as she has done all her life, and that might only make people talk worse after all; and then George will be away after awhile."

"I don't mean anything of that kind, as you know perfectly well, Floss," said Mr. Egerton, impatiently. "Can't you give her a quiet hint not to come over so often, or go about with her yourself when she is here —or something? Dear me, I thought a woman was always able to manage those kind of little things! Or George might go away—surely his leave must be nearly up?"

"I am afraid he has a fortnight, papa," said Floss.

"Bless me! a fortnight! It's positively disgraceful the amount of idle time those young fellows have—enough to ruin them for life!" said Mr. Egerton, who certainly ought to have been a judge, as he had never done a stroke of work in his life, "and only three days of it gone. He must be spoken to—

George must be spoken to. Surely he has some friends he can visit?"

"Yes, I do wish you would speak to him," said Floss, anxiously. "You so seldom blame him for anything, that I am sure he would heed it from you."

"*I* speak to him!" said Mr. Egerton, in dismay. "I couldn't possibly speak to him—it would come very badly from me. No, no, it would not do at all; it would be making far too much of it. No, you are the proper person—a little hint from you would come very much better indeed!"

"Oh, papa!" said Floss, "it is you who are the proper person—it is indeed! George would not think anything of it from me; he would only be angry, and say I was interfering. Indeed, indeed, papa, it would be much better if you would speak to him!"

"Perhaps you will allow that I know a little more of the world than you do," said Mr. Egerton, pompously. "I assure you that a remonstrance from me would give the matter far too great importance, while from you—"

And Floss knew her father well enough to be aware that there was no use in persisting. Mr. Egerton had always excellent reasons for declining to do anything disagreeable, and having once established them to his own satisfaction, he would be content to repeat them as long as Floss wanted to discuss the subject.

So, as there was no one else to do it, Floss did make up her mind to say something to George, and a few lines in a letter which came from Harry the next morning confirmed her in this intention.

"I suppose Sylvia has given you her own version of her split with Murray?" he wrote. "He certainly did behave very badly, and there was a very disgraceful scene, but still Sylvia needn't try to make herself out an injured saint. She and George have been enough to drive any man mad ever since I came to Dublin."

And after reading this, Floss did gain courage to speak to her brother, and received a snub for her pains, as she had expected.

"Gossip!" exclaimed George, picturesquely tossing back his hair. "If vulgar minds choose to take up things in that way, I can't help it, and I don't care. Neither does Sylvia."

"No, but she ought to care, and so should you, for her sake," said Floss. "I dare say I have got a vulgar mind, George, but it does not seem to me very nice for you to be always anxious to be alone together; and if you must write poetry, I really think you might manage it without her assistance."

"It is the way of the world," said George, sadly; "friendship between man and woman is always misconstrued."

"Now, George, do you mean to tell me that if your friendship was with a man, you would wish to be always alone with him?" said Floss.

"If such friendship as ours were possible between man and man, I should," said George, sententiously.

"Oh, George, you vex me so!" said Floss; "won't you think of Sylvia, and go away for a time for her sake, if you are so fond of her."

"My dear Floss, you must admit that I have

listened to you very patiently," said George with dignity, "but, I must say, it is a subject I am not prepared to discuss with you. Believe me, Sylvia and I are quite capable of managing our own affairs; and, in fact, this is hardly the conversation for a young girl—"

Poor Floss began to feel as if she had done something dreadfully indelicate.

"But, papa says—" she began, making a last effort.

"My dear girl, whatever my father wishes to say to me, he can surely say himself," said George, who knew just as well as his sister that Mr. Egerton would certainly never say anything to him.

Floss was silenced, if not convinced.

And Sylvia continued to come over to the Elms and spend the day with George and Billy as contentedly as if she had entirely forgotten the fact of her marriage.

Of course people talked in Delagherty—it was many a long day since there had been anything so interesting to discuss. As for Sylvia, she went placidly on her way, apparently unconscious of causing perplexity to any one, or at any rate completely indifferent to the fact. But at last there was something that she *did* mind.

Mrs. Carr sent out invitations for a small dance, and among those invitations one for Sylvia was not included. It was certainly a marked proceeding to omit such very near neighbours, and it was meant to be marked.

Everybody else about Delagherty was asked, and most of them accepted, while they grumbled at the

inconvenient time that had been selected. A little later, and there would have been the militia to supply dancing men; a little earlier, and there would at least have been a few stray individuals who were home for Easter: but as it was, there would certainly be a superfluity of girls. It is just possible that a desire to administer a wholesome reproof to Sylvia had something to do with Mrs. Carr's disregard for these things, and certainly if she had wished to annoy that young lady she had succeeded thoroughly. Sylvia was extremely disconsolate.

CHAPTER XLIV.

UNCERTAINTY.

If Sylvia was quite content with the present state of affairs, her father certainly was not. Poor Mr. Alison's responsibilities with regard to her weighed very heavily upon his mind, and he found it very difficult to decide what was the best thing to do. Every morning he said to himself that he really must speak to Sylvia in the evening, and every evening he decided to put it off till next day. She was not in the mood for serious conversation, or some of the Egertons were over, or—there was always some objection, and perhaps the greatest was that he did not know at all what he meant to say to her.

So it came about that nearly a fortnight passed before he spoke to her again on the subject, and then something happened that made it necessary for him to speak at once.

There came a letter from Crayshaw to Mr. Alison—only a line, enclosing one from Murray. Crayshaw's was very short and to the point.

"Dear Mr. Alison," he wrote, "I enclose a letter

from Murray. I shall be very glad if I can be of any use.

"Yours very truly,

"J. D. CRAYSHAW."

And Murray's was not much longer.

"DEAR CRAYSHAW,—Will you write to Mr. Alison, and see what arrangements Sylvia would prefer for the future. I should wish her to live with her father, and I suppose she would prefer this herself. She has £800 a year settled upon her at my death, and I am willing for her to have it at once. She can make what other arrangements she pleases and communicate with my solicitors. I am thinking of the Turkish army, but I can't say I have made any settled plans as yet.

"Yours ever,

"MURRAY."

And these letters decided Mr. Alison to speak to Sylvia at once.

He found her in the garden, very comfortably established in a lounging-chair, waiting for George, who had promised to come over that morning. But despite this prospect of felicity, Mrs. Murray was in rather a disconsolate frame of mind. In the first place, Mrs. Carr's dance was coming off that night, then George's leave would be up next day, and finally, Sylvia was conscious of a coolness in Floss's reception of her the day before, which had vexed her a good deal.

She was surprised to see her father, for it was past his hour for going to Delagherty.

"Sylvia," he said gravely, "these letters came this morning, and I should like you to see them."

"Oh—from Arthur!" said Sylvia, flushing a little, and bestowing only a glance on Crayshaw's note.

She would have liked her father to go away and leave her, but this he had not the smallest intention of doing. Instead, he watched her face, trying to gather her feelings from it.

And when she came to the end, she gave a little cry of dismay.

"Oh, father!" she said, "the Turkish army! Does that mean going to Turkey?"

"Of course it does," said Mr. Alison, "and the very best thing under the circumstances, I think."

Then he was astonished to see Sylvia's eyes fill with sudden tears.

Great as was his horror of scenes, he was pleased to see that she was perhaps, after all, not as indifferent as she seemed.

"To Turkey!" she repeated, with a sob in her voice; "oh, I don't want him to go to Turkey!"

"Well, it rests with you to prevent it," said Mr. Alison, beginning to think that things looked most hopeful.

"Do you think he would not go if I were to write and say I would not like it?" said Sylvia, eagerly. "I don't see why he need go so far away."

"I am sure he will not go if you write and say that you are willing to go back to him," said Mr. Alison; but from the change in her face, he saw he had gone too far.

"No, I can't do that," she said, shaking her head

with a sigh. "If it was not to Scotland—but he should not go so far; you see, if I were ill, or anything happened—"

"If you won't live with the man, you can't expect him to hang round England in hopes of illness or accidents," said Mr. Alison, sharply; "besides which, it would be utter ruin for him. No, you have your choice now, and you had better be very sure of your own mind before you make it, for you decide the lives of two people."

"Oh, I don't want never to see him again," said Sylvia, in a troubled voice. For the first time she realised everything. Never to see Murray again, probably never as long as she lived. Never to hear him say he loved her, perhaps to have the remembrance of her soon grow indifferent to him. After all, would she ever find any one to care for her as Murray cared—Murray, who, if he ever blamed her for anything, was so easily won round by a few caressing words?

No, George was not at all the same thing. When with him, it was he, not she, who was on a pinnacle of superiority. Everything seemed rosy about her life with Murray now, even their quarrels—everything except that dreadful estate in Scotland, with no neighbours except the clergyman's family.

"After all," said Sylvia, suddenly, looking up hopefully, "why should he go away? Why should he not get—something—in England, and he could even, perhaps, come over and see me sometimes—"

"Sylvia, you are talking utter nonsense!" said Mr. Alison, sharply; "if you won't live with the man as

his wife, you can't have him coming to see you like an ordinary acquaintance. And as for getting something to do in England, a man can't set to work to learn a new profession at his age—not to say that he would start with a great disadvantage in England. No, no, make up your mind; there can be no half measures, and you will have nobody to blame but yourself if you are very sorry for what you have done some day."

"I can't go back to him," said Sylvia, with obstinate sweetness.

Her father was very angry.

"Very well; have your own way," he said shortly. And then he left her in a decidedly dismal frame of mind.

George found her still immensely depressed when he came upon the scene half an hour later, and naturally set it down to the dance.

He did not personally care about dances in the least, and bestowed a pitying contempt upon Sylvia's feelings on the subject.

"Well, Sylvia; not got an invitation from Mrs. Carr yet?" he said, throwing himself into a picturesque attitude against the trunk of the apple-tree under which she was sitting.

"I am very likely to get one at this eleventh hour, or to accept it if I did," said Sylvia.

"It is a great pity," said George, with condescending regret.

And Sylvia felt that her lot was indeed a hard one at present, with one trouble following upon another in this way.

"I *should* like to have gone to-night," she said.

"Look here, Sylvia," said George, softly, "Mrs. Carr may say what she likes, but I am not going near her dance to-night. I think it is a great shame for her not to have asked you, and I am not going to spend my last night away from you. I will come over here for the evening, instead."

"Yes, do come," said Sylvia, but without appearing to become much less disconsolate.

"And won't that be a pleasanter way of spending our last evening, after all?" said George.

But Sylvia could not truthfully agree to this.

"You see, George, a dance—!" she said apologetically.

"I must say, I did not think you would care so much," he said, in a half-offended tone.

But in truth, his presence had not been one of Sylvia's attractions to this dance. Platonic friendship notwithstanding, she would have been far from desirous to devote her evening to George, whose dancing was not by any means above criticism, but who was far too touchy upon the subject to endure any suggestions.

CHAPTER XLV.

MR. ALISON AND CRAYSHAW.

"I AM going to Dublin to-morrow to see Captain Crayshaw, and make a few necessary business arrangements," said Mr. Alison, meeting Sylvia on the stairs that evening on her way to dress for dinner.

But if he had expected to elicit any further display of feeling from the girl, he was mistaken.

"Thank you, father," she said, and that was all. She did not even ask what arrangements he intended to make.

But that evening George found her in unusually low spirits, in a frame of mind that would have offended him mightily if he had been obliged to set it all down to the dance. But then, what was more natural than that she should be sad on the eve of his return to Dublin? Poor little soul! It would be very dull for her.

"I will get leave, and run down for a couple of days, very soon," he said.

They were standing together by the drawing-room window, and the moment for saying good-bye had almost come. George was to go up by the early train

next morning, so they would not meet again. Sylvia started when he spoke to her.

"You will come down—oh yes," she said absently.

"And if you are worried or bothered, you must write to me and depend on me," pursued George, softly.

"And you think I am right to refuse to go back to Arthur?" said Sylvia.

Both of them characteristically followed out their own lines of thought, and just at present these lines were very wide apart.

"If you have any self-respect," said George, "you will not lower yourself in such a way."

"I wish—it was not all such a worry," she said, piteously.

And then Mr. Alison unconscionably proceeded to make his appearance in his own drawing-room, and what was more, this unreasonable man remained there till George took his departure, apparently quite unconscious of being in any way *de trop*. But in truth poor Mr. Alison was only too well aware of his unwelcomeness, which the others, to do justice to their sincerity, took no special pains to conceal. It was infinitely more disagreeable to him than it was to them to sit there endeavouring to make conversation, and it was a case of virtue being its own reward, for certainly neither of the other two were at all grateful to him for his late awakening to a sense of the proprieties. And he might almost as well have remained comfortably in the dining-room for all the good he did.

"I am very sorry you are going, George," said Sylvia, when that young man rose to say good-bye;

"I shall miss you immensely, and you must write to me very soon, and—" Here she lowered her voice, and the end of the sentence was quite inaudible to Mr. Alison.

And she would have said no more if Mr. Alison had not been present, though it is possible George might have done so.

Next day, George and Mr. Alison both departed for Dublin, leaving Sylvia in a most disconsolate frame of mind. Her return to Delagherty somehow had not fulfilled her dreams. No one seemed to sympathise with her properly, or even understand how badly Arthur had behaved to her. Every one, even Floss, seemed to look upon her coolly, and Sylvia was the very last person in the world to whom such a state of affairs was endurable.

George and Mr. Alison travelled up to Dublin in the same carriage, with much mutual civility and a great deal of mutual dislike. They parted at the Great Northern station, and Mr. Alison, having disposed of his luggage at the Shelbourne, drove down to the Royal Barracks to see Crayshaw. He was not in, so Mr. Alison was obliged to content himself with leaving a note for him inviting him to dinner that evening, and on his way back he met Captain Atterly in the barrack square. It was rather awkward for both men, but they simply exchanged a few words, and Captain Atterly said he hoped Mr. Alison would dine at mess on the next guest night, if he were still in Dublin. And then Mr. Alison went on his way, and found the hour before he could expect Crayshaw rather hard to dispose of.

When he did come, neither of them wasted any time in preliminaries.

"I have come to see you on unpleasant business, Captain Crayshaw," said Mr. Alison. "I am anxious to have your opinion on what is best to be done."

He found it much easier to speak to a stranger like Crayshaw than he would have done to enter on the subject with any of his friends.

As for Crayshaw, he felt his position to be a little awkward.

"I sent you Murray's letter," he said, with some hesitation.

"Yes," said Mr. Alison, "and if nothing better can be done, his proposals will have to be considered. But I am very unwilling to believe in the impossibility of a reconciliation. Do you think Murray could not be induced to consider this?"

"I have heard nothing from Murray, except the letter I sent you, since he left; but the last time I saw him after—after the court-martial—I know he was most willing and anxious to do his best to gain your daughter's forgiveness. I believe he will make no difficulties in agreeing to whatever she wishes."

"That is just my difficulty," said Mr. Alison. "I really haven't the least idea what she does wish! She says she won't go back to him, and yet she seemed awfully hurt at the idea of his leaving the country. I fancy if Murray were to come over to see her—"

"I don't think he will do that, Mr. Alison, unless he is assured that she wishes it," said Crayshaw, gravely.

"Then I am sure I don't know what is best to be

done. I suppose I shall have to go over to London and see Murray myself," said Mr. Alison, with a sigh.

"If," said Crayshaw, "I could be of any use—"

"You are very kind," said Mr. Alison, a little stiffly, "but—"

"It is not kindness at all. I shall only be too glad to do anything for Murray. You may find it hard to believe just now, Mr. Alison, but Murray is a good fellow in spite of all."

"I am glad to hear you say so—very glad," said Mr. Alison; "for I must say I have sometimes doubted whether we may be doing either of them a kindness in attempting to bring them together again; but then—"

"I hope and believe Murray will give your daughter no reason to repent," said Crayshaw. And then a waiter made his appearance to announce that dinner was ready.

"Then can I be of any use in going over to London for you?" said Crayshaw, pausing at the door.

"I am ashamed to trouble you so far," said Mr. Alison, but his relief was unmistakable. What could he of all people have said to this ill-conducted son-in-law of his, whom he knew so slightly?

"As to trouble, it is none," said Crayshaw. "I will get a week's leave and take a trip up to town, and I will write to you as soon as I have seen Murray."

"I shall be very much obliged to you," was all Mr. Alison's answer, and being a man of few words, he meant what he said.

CHAPTER XLVI.

CRAYSHAW AND MURRAY.

CRAYSHAW went straight to Murray's solicitors on his arrival in London, but they could not give him his address; neither did they know anything about him at his clubs, and it was more by good luck than anything else that he ran across him at one of the theatres that night. Had Mr. Alison gone to London as he had contemplated doing, his search might probably have been indefinitely prolonged, and Crayshaw himself had begun to fear that a few days of his short leave might be wasted before he found his friend.

He was extremely glad that it was he, and not Mr. Alison, who had met Murray, when he perceived the rowdiness of the party to which he belonged, and the unshaven and generally disreputable appearance of the young man himself.

Crayshaw made his way round to him on the first opportunity, and his appearance had a decidedly sobering effect on Murray.

"Hullo, Crayshaw!" he said, with a feeble attempt at defiance; "didn't expect to see you here, old fellow. Like to be introduced?"

"I have got news from home for you, Murray," said Crayshaw. "I am putting up at the Métropole, and, unless you want to see this thing out, you may as well come home with me."

"Come and see you to-morrow," suggested Murray.

"I'd sooner it was to-night, if you can manage it," said Crayshaw. He knew that if he once succeeded in rousing Murray's spirit of opposition his chance for the evening was gone.

"Well, I'm not going for half an hour or so, anyway," said Murray, uneasily.

"All right, I'm in no hurry, and I don't mind stopping to see this out." And with a nod to Murray, he returned to his former seat. But he could see that Murray was very far from comfortable. He had insisted on remaining out of sheer bravado, but he could not return to his former interest either in his companions or in the performance. Presently he came over to Crayshaw of his own accord.

"I've had enough of this rot now, if you have," he said. "Nothing wrong—in Ireland?"

"I will tell you all about it when we get home," said Crayshaw, cruelly.

He knew quite well he was cruel, but he would not risk the loss of Murray's interest and willingness to go home with him. So they took a hansom and drove to the Métropole, and until they were in Crayshaw's room neither said a word. Then Murray sank wearily into a chair, and Crayshaw saw he looked very white and ill. Crayshaw did not turn up the gas.

"Would you care for anything, Murray?" he said, seating himself a little way off.

"I shouldn't object to a whisky and soda.," said Murray, shortly.

Crayshaw saw very well that he had had quite as much of that kind of refreshment as was advisable for him; however, he rang the bell, and ordered what his companion wanted. And after this, Murray's state of utter, silent depression seemed to vanish.

"If you have come to hold forth to me on my sins, Crayshaw," he said excitedly, "I won't stand it—do you hear?"

"I did come over partly to see you," said Crayshaw. "When I heard you were thinking of leaving the country, I thought I should like to have a few days with you first. Have you settled anything about the Turkish army?"

"No, I have settled nothing."

"I am glad of that, because I should like to have a talk with you before you do settle anything."

"There is no use in talking," said Murray, roughly; "you'd better let me go the devil in peace, for you can't prevent it—only one person could have prevented it—"

"That is what I want to talk to you about," said Crayshaw; "the one person who can prevent it—"

"I didn't say *can*, I said *could* have prevented it," said Murray, irritably. "You needn't talk to me about reconciliations or things of that kind, if that is what you mean; if I wasn't fit for her then, do you think I am fit for her *now?* D—— it all, leave me in peace!"

And Crayshaw saw there was nothing to be gained by talking to Murray just then.

"You'll stop here to-night, won't you?" he said, and Murray, though a little suspicious that Crayshaw might have ulterior designs beyond the desire for his company, was too tired and dazed to make much opposition.

In the morning he was quite in a different frame of mind. Crayshaw sent up a waiter to tell him that breakfast was ready, and a few minutes later he came down, much improved in appearance since the night before. For one thing he had shaved, and brushed his hair, which was certainly still long enough to make him very unlike the invariably spruce and carefully got up Mr. Murray of the Black Watch.

Crayshaw had ordered their breakfast in a private room, and he was there, reading the paper, and waiting for him.

That any of that breakfast was eaten was due to Crayshaw; Murray scarcely did more than allow himself to be helped to everything, and then cut it up into small pieces with his knife and fork.

"You wouldn't be surprised that I'm not up to much of a breakfast if you knew how I have spent my time lately, since—how long is it since I left Dublin?" he said with a faint smile.

Crayshaw was afraid he had a very good idea how his time had been spent.

"I'm sorry to see you look so seedy, old fellow," he said.

"How are they at home?" said Murray, with some hesitation; "didn't you tell me last night you had a message for me from there?"

"Mr. Alison came up to Dublin to see me," said

Crayshaw; "he was very anxious that everything should be brought right."

"I don't know quite what I said to you last night, but I have a notion I was infernally disagreeable," said Murray. "At any rate, I have been thinking it over this morning, and I know I would give my right hand to have things straight with Sylvia. But then, I don't know—even if she were willing to take the risk—I'm almost afraid it is too late for setting myself straight, and that the Turkish army is the best chance for me now."

"Well, if I were you, I should not own myself beaten yet. A fresh start and a totally new life—why shouldn't you have that as well in Scotland as in Turkey?"

"But is Sylvia willing?" said Murray, in a low voice.

"Honestly, I don't know," said Crayshaw. "Mr. Alison says she says little, but that she seemed very unhappy at the idea of your going to Turkey. I dare say she feels she has been perhaps hard on you. Give her and yourself another chance, Murray."

"She was never a bit harder on me than I deserved," said Murray, in half-offended tones. "God bless her," he ended, reverently.

To Murray, as to Sylvia, the troubles of the past days seemed to have vanished, and, left a remembrance of nothing but happiness, and unlike her, all that he did remember of them seemed to him now to have arisen from his own fault.

"Look here, Murray," said Crayshaw, after a pause, "let me write to Mr. Alison, and say you are willing

to abide entirely by your wife's wishes; and then, whatever she says, you will at least be able to feel you have honestly done your best."

Murray did not answer for a few minutes. He sat meditatively stroking his moustache, with his eyes full of thought—eyes that seemed melancholy in even his gayest moods.

He had not forgotten that last interview with Sylvia, though the sense of his own wrongs towards her had swept away any bitterness against her. He was honestly anxious to put himself aside, and do what was best for her. Murray had been more thoughtless than really selfish all his life, and just now he was not thinking of himself at all.

"Write what you like, Crayshaw," he said.

"All right," said Crayshaw, cheerfully, "I foresee it will all dry straight, old fellow. I'll write to-night, and till the answer comes you can help me to put in my leave."

"Aren't you going to your people?" said Murray.

"I may run up to them for a day on my way home, but I've been thinking it's a pity to waste this ripping weather in town. What do you say to chartering a boat, and having a few days on the Thames? I haven't been down for more than a day since I left Eton. We could settle where Mr. Alison had better write to."

Murray turned red. He knew very well why Crayshaw made this proposal, that he understood how unwilling he would be to meet any of his friends just then.

"Well, what do you say?" said Crayshaw, after

waiting for a minute for him to speak. "If you have nothing better in view, I think my idea is not a bad one. I don't know if you dislike London in May as much as I do. I am not keen to do the park, and there would be no possibility of escaping all manner of frivolity."

Murray only said "All right," but just then he felt scarcely sure enough of himself to say much more.

He was dimly feeling the difference between Crayshaw's quiet undemonstrative friendship, his silence from reproach when it would have been useless, and Sylvia's indignant aloofness.

CHAPTER XLVII.

SYLVIA'S DECISION.

CRAYSHAW'S letter reached Delagherty at the best possible time for the fulfilment of his and Murray's wishes. Sylvia had begun to be horribly, unutterably bored. There was an entire want of sympathy in the neighbourhood on the subject of her misfortunes —in fact she considered everybody was intensely disagreeable.

Mrs. Carr had actually cut her, Sylvia felt sure intentionally, in Delagherty street one day, and the Grimshaws and the Besants had not once asked her over since her return; and she knew the Dawsons had had a small tennis to which she had not been invited, and before they had always asked her.

It is probable that this neglect was chiefly accidental; Sylvia married could not of course be as important a person to these mothers with ineligible sons as she had been when free and available, and she had never made any girl friends. However it was, the fact remained that she was very dull.

Then she was conscious of disapproval from her father and Floss—disapproval which made her cease to wish for their society. In fact she felt in a

general atmosphere of disapproval just then, and no one could dislike it more.

"You'll end by driving me to run away with George or some one!" she said indignantly to Floss one day, "just so as to give you something real to disapprove of!"

Then, her ponies were sold, and Mr. Alison did not appear in any hurry to procure others for her; so if she wanted to go into Delagherty she was obliged to walk, and she particularly disliked walking.

Certainly Charlie Morrison and Mr. Dent, and a few other Delagherty men of that calibre, were more anxious than ever to be agreeable to her; but Sylvia, even in her present destitution of society, masculine and otherwise, could not but feel this a downcome. Mr. Dent was admittedly a cad, and Charlie Morrison was renowned for a propensity to attach himself to any girl who was willing to have him. She could not even go to the militia functions—the very feeblest of entertainments—because she had no one to go with her, and her father would not consent to her attending them alone. Besides, it would have entailed a two-mile walk to begin with.

So Sylvia began to find life at Delagherty by no means realised her expectations. And one day, when she was in the very lowest of spirits, came Crayshaw's letter.

She was not in the garden this time, when Mr. Alison brought it to her; instead she was sitting at the piano in the drawing-room, disconsolately strumming a few bars of a valse now and then, and wondering what she was going to do with herself all day.

When companionship and amusement failed her, Sylvia found herself sorely at a loss.

"There is a letter I think you had better read, Sylvia," said her father; "read it, and make up your mind about the matter once for all. I will expect you to tell me what answer I am to send when I come back to-night."

And then he left her, and went off to his business, feeling pretty confident that her answer would be a satisfactory one.

He had provided Sylvia with something to think about the whole day. It was really very hard to decide. Certainly it would be very nice to regain every one's approval, to make Mrs. Carr and the rest believe nothing had ever been wrong. Yes; there would undoubtedly be immense satisfaction in that! Her father would be pleased, Floss would be pleased. Every one could not but think how well she had acted towards Murray; and as for Murray himself—ah, how pleased he would be, how grateful, how penitent! But then, the estate in Scotland—well, she was not there yet, and at the worst it was not in the immediate future.

So it came about that by the evening Sylvia had pretty well made up her mind as to the answer, though when her father asked her for it in the drawing-room after dinner, she only temporised, and said:

"I don't know."

Now Mr. Alison was thoroughly tired of the whole affair, and considered that Sylvia was the most unreasonable young woman he had ever come across So he spoke sharply enough;

"I should like to know what you mean by that absurd answer, Sylvia. Are you, or are you not, willing to go back to your husband? I should be very much obliged if you would make it your business to know."

"Well, Gov., you see there is Scotland," said Sylvia, slowly, "I am sure I could not live there—"

"Nonsense," said Mr. Alison, unsympathetically; "why, you could live anywhere—you have never had a day's illness in your life as far as I know."

"But it is the loneliness," said Sylvia, dolefully. "Arthur has always said it is very lonely, and I cannot go hunting or shooting, or— "

Mr. Alison sighed impatiently.

"Well, Sylvia, you are beyond my comprehension," he said; "make up your mind to please yourself, but spare me the arguments for and against."

Far from feeling repulsed, Sylvia only came round to him, and seated herself close to him.

"Father, dear," she said caressingly, "don't you think that if I give up—everything"— it was just as well to be a little vague—"to go back to Arthur, *he* might give up going to that horrid Scotland?"

"All those things can be settled afterwards between you," said Mr. Alison; "the present question is whether you intend to go back to him or not."

"But don't you think," said Sylvia, persuasively, "that when you are writing you might just mention something about Scotland—even if he would take a house in town for half the year—"

"Once for all, Sylvia, I won't say a word about anything of the kind," said Mr. Alison, in the

decided tone that told her further argument was useless.

So she gave in, with the best possible grace.

"Very well, Gov., whatever you think best," she said meekly; and that night Mr. Alison wrote to Crayshaw. But before he went to business in the morning, Sylvia came to him with a little three-cornered note in her hand.

"For Arthur," she said, with a pretty flush; and Mr. Alison could not divest himself of an uncomfortable feeling that there might be something in it about the house in town.

And then Sylvia made her way over to the Elms.

"You shall be disagreeable no longer, Floss," she said gaily. "I have written to Arthur, and everything is going to come all right."

The fateful letter met Murray and Crayshaw at Oxford. They had a few very idle, peaceful days on the river, days during which Murray, in spite of his suspense, contrived to regain his spirits at intervals. These brief returns to his old sunny manner came always as a surprise to Crayshaw, well as he knew Murray's elasticity of temperament.

But the last day had been a less cheerful one. It had been a bitter disappointment to him to find no letter awaiting them on their arrival, when he knew it would have been possible for him to receive one. He said little, but that in itself was unusual with Murray. And next day he went up to the post-office by himself, having obtained Crayshaw's permission to open Mr. Alison's letter, whether it was addressed to him or not.

The Irish post did not get in till ten, and when Murray found this he was obliged to fill up the interval with a stroll about Oxford. It did not strike him to go back to the hotel and have his breakfast—they had not tried spending their nights on the boat. Crayshaw, who had been accustomed to early hours for the last few days, got hungry, and had his own breakfast. Then he went to his room and began to bundle the few things he had needed for the night into the small portmanteau which he and Murray had agreed to share for this expedition. He had just discovered that, having carefully packed up the trousers he had worn yesterday under everything else, he had left all his money in the pockets, and was ruefully contemplating the undoing of his handiwork, when Murray made his appearance.

Up the stairs about six steps at a time, and into Crayshaw's room like a whirlwind, without the previous ceremony of knocking—there was no need to ask what Murray's news had been.

"Hurrah!" said he jubilantly. "It's all right, Crayshaw!"

Crayshaw had never seen him so utterly moved beyond his own control.

"She wrote to me herself—what a darling she is!—my sweet little Sylvia—oh, d——! what an idiot I am." And Murray dashed his hand across his eyes with an uncertain laugh.

The relief had been so intense that he was excited to the extent of being hardly aware what he was doing.

"I am awfully glad," said Crayshaw.

"It's all thanks to you, old fellow—I shall never forget it," said Murray. "If you are not our very first visitor, may I wake up and find this all a dream and that I am off to Turkey!"

"Go and have your breakfast, and don't be a fool," said Crayshaw; but his tone was sympathetic, if his words were not.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

MEETING AGAIN.

"It is really quite as exciting as getting married!" said Sylvia.

She had made a sudden appearance at the windows of the Elms' drawing-room, greeting Floss with these words. The coolness between them was a thing of the past now, and the announcement of Arthur Murray's approaching arrival to all the Delagherty people had not given her more satisfaction than it had to Floss.

"There has been a telegram from Arthur," said Sylvia. "He is crossing by Larne and Stranraer, and will be here this evening."

"I am very glad," said Floss.

"I only just ran over to tell you, for I have not a minute," said Sylvia, briskly. "I am going to put on my new dress, and I have my hair to curl; if I had known last night I would have put it in papers—it looks so much better than when it is curled by tongs."

"Why, your hair curls naturally," said Floss.

"Yes, for ordinary occasions, but not when I want to look my best," said Sylvia, brightly. "Do you know, I am feeling quite shy about it, Floss; but it

will be awfully nice to see him again. Do you think I am looking—pretty?"

Floss did think she was.

"But I believe Mr. Murray will be thinking of you yourself, and not of your appearance," she said.

"Ah, you have not been married," said Sylvia, nodding her head sagely. "Men are not like that —they always think of your appearance!"

And then she darted away, leaving Floss looking after her with a doubt on her mind whether all was right even yet. Was Sylvia's hardness due to want of feeling, or want of comprehension?

As to Sylvia herself, she was in a very happy frame of mind. There was nothing to damp her joy, except, indeed, that there had been no answer from George to her apologetic letter to him. But she was not in the least inclined to worry over this as she performed her elaborate toilet for Murray's benefit. Apart from him, she had an artistic pleasure in the consciousness that she was well dressed and looking her best; and then, next to herself, she certainly *did* care for Arthur, and it was a satisfaction to feel that she was behaving to him in a thoroughly magnanimous way—a way that *he* at least would appreciate, if no one else did.

She was in the drawing-room to receive him, and Mr. Alison let him go there alone. He himself had said nothing to Murray, only shaken hands with him and told him where he would find Sylvia; and indeed it would have been of little use to speak to that young man just then.

He was much more nervous than Sylvia. He came blindly into the room, not seeing her for a

moment as he stood by the window. And it was she who was the first to move.

"Arthur, my dear," she said, coming across the room to where he stood, and holding up her face to be kissed. "It is very good to have you again."

And as for Murray, he was for a long time content to hold her to him, and say nothing. She was his again—his, when he thought he had lost her for ever.

And Sylvia said nothing about town houses that night, being thoroughly contented with the present moment, and feeling that with all his sins her husband at least knew how to appreciate her.

It was not till the evening of the next day that she mentioned the subject. She had gone upstairs to dress for dinner, and was sitting before the glass in the daintiest of dressing-gowns, brushing out her thick reddish-brown hair. Murray had come up, too, but could not be persuaded to go to his dressing-room and array himself. There was lots of time, he said, and so he lingered about, considerably impeding Sylvia, especially as he was in a most lively and lover-like mood.

"It is awfully bad for your hair, do you know, brushing it so much," he said.

"Well, if you were not talking to me, probably I should not brush it so much," said Sylvia, serenely.

"Well, stop and talk to me. I wish you could always be like that—you look so sweet—no, I don't; I prefer no one should see you so but me, for they certainly couldn't help kissing you!" And Murray proceeded to give her a very hearty kiss himself.

"You silly boy!" said Sylvia; "come and sober down, and talk business."

"Business," said Murray; "I'll talk about anything under the sun you like."

He threw himself down in the most comfortable armchair, and Sylvia came to sit on his knee, leaning her fair dishevelled curls against his shoulder, and feeling just then it would be hard for him to deny her anything.

"I want to know where we are going to live, Arthur," she said.

"Oh, you disagreeable child, do you think I can talk of that kind of thing to you to-day!" said Murray, carelessly; but Sylvia saw he was a little sobered.

"You will talk of anything that I like," said Sylvia, confidently.

"Well, then, don't you think we shall make a good farmer and farmeress in Scotland?" suggested Murray.

"That is it," said Sylvia. "Arthur, I don't want to go to Scotland."

"Why talk about it to-day, my pet?" said Murray, the slightest of clouds coming over his happy face.

"Because I shall not be content until it is settled," said Sylvia. "It is not as if you wanted so much to go and settle down there yourself—you don't really want it, do you, dear?"

"It is not what I want—if I had my choice, I would be quite willing to do as you wished," said Murray, soberly. "It is a case of necessity."

"Well, listen to me, Arthur. Don't you think com-

promises are capital things?" said Sylvia, softly stroking his hand as it lay between both hers.

"Supposing I agree to go and farm with you in Scotland for six months of the year, and supposing you agree to come and have a good time in London with me for the other six months?"

Murray was grave enough now For a few minutes he was silent, his fingers mechanically playing with Sylvia's curls, in a way that told her that at least he was not offended.

"I didn't want to talk of disagreeable things today," he said; "but, after all, I dare say it is better to tell you everything at once. Sylvia, have you any idea how much we spent during our six months in Dublin?"

Sylvia shook her head.

"Not the faintest," she said; "but really, Arthur, it cannot have been much."

"That depends on what you call much," said Murray. "I don't think we did anything particularly extravagant, but we got through more money than we ought, somehow. I don't exactly know myself how much, but I know it is somewhere near three thousand; and to spend that in six months out of an income of two thousand a year is pretty good."

"Three thousand! My goodness, Arthur, how did we do it?" exclaimed Sylvia.

"I am sure I don't know, darling," said Murray, "but somehow we let it slip away. And then, this last miserable time in London—I really don't know what I spent, but the result is—it is very hard on you, darling, but I am afraid we'll have to economise

for a few years. Do you mind very much, my darling?"

"Do you mean we shall be very poor?" said Sylvia in consternation.

"Not exactly very poor, dear; but with the estate to keep up and so on—well, I am afraid we can't manage a season in London at present, and indeed at the best of times it would have been a—pull. It won't be so very dull, after all, darling; we can have people for the shooting, and—I'll do my best to make you happy."

Sylvia was a young woman who never yielded ungracefully, and just at present the estate in Scotland was in the future.

"Well, dear, never mind the house in London," she said magnanimously; "we are going to be sensible, happy country people."

"It won't be so bad," pursued Murray. "You'll be a perfect little queen there—everybody about is anxious to see you. It won't be so very bad, my pet."

"Arthur, you idling person!" exclaimed Sylvia, jumping up; "there is the gong, and you haven't even begun to dress."

CHAPTER XLIX.

HARRY COMES TO EENAH.

"I AM very glad to see you, Egerton. I was half afraid you would never find your way to this back of the world place."

The most primitive of Scotch country stations, and the wettest of Scotch November days. The station-master was wet, the solitary porter was wet, and Murray was very wet indeed, with the rain running down his waterproof coat in a steady stream.

"Sylvia fully intended to come to meet you if it had not been so wet," said Murray.

"Well, I must say it is rather—showery!" said Harry Egerton, cheerfully; neither wind nor weather ever effected *his* spirits. "There, my whole kit is contained in that bag. Hope you aren't ashamed of greeting a third-class passenger! You see it would never do for a private to go anything else, even in mufti, and we'll hope the station-master hasn't remarked it."

"Don't you think we had better go on?" suggested Murray; "we have fourteen miles to drive, and it isn't the pleasantest of weather. My trap is waiting outside. I hope you're well prepared for wet?"

"Indeed, I wonder you didn't bring the close carriage for me," said Harry, laughing.

"Don't even possess such an article," said Murray; "there's only one road near Eenah you can drive a one-horse machine on with any comfort, and nowhere at all two horses could go."

"So you take to a tandem," said Harry, surveying Murray's horses and trap with much satisfaction. "Well, it's providential my life isn't of much importance to any one but myself, but do remember *I* set some value upon it."

"Get up, then, if you are prepared to risk it," said Murray. "There, leave his head, McCrea—all right."

And after a few plunges they were off most successfully.

"Now," said Harry, "let me do the civil and inquire for Sylvia."

"Oh, Sylvia is flourishing, thank you," said Murray "and looking forward to your coming immensely."

"What does she think of my comedown in life? I suppose she was awfully disgusted when she heard I had enlisted?" said Harry. "I know *you* think I have come to utter grief."

Murray was some few minutes before he replied. Perhaps his leader engaged his attention just then; perhaps he remembered to how much worse grief he himself had come—at any rate Harry did, as soon as he had spoken.

"No," Murray said at last. "It is a pity, of course, but if you like the life—"

"It's just this," said Harry; "before I went in for that last exam. of mine, I made up my mind that

if I failed that would be my last. It's a rough life, but I don't dislike it. There's only one other gentleman in the ranks in our regiment, and he's a drunken brute, but the men are very good sort of chaps, take them on the whole."

"You haven't been over to Delagherty since, have you?" said Murray.

"No," said Harry, serenely; "you see a private isn't exactly a millionaire. But I shall go some day, and create a sensation. I say, that bay horse is a good one to go, Murray—did you breed him yourself?" and then the conversation became desultory.

Murray did not waste any unnecessary time on the road, but still, between ascents and descents, ruts in which the wheels stuck, and places where the road was a narrow strip and a tandem required great care, it was nearly two hours before they arrived at the gates of Eenah.

"There being nothing visible but mist, I haven't been able to express my admiration as we came along," said Harry; "but you certainly have got fine gates, Murray."

Murray laughed.

"Something in the style of a gaol, only that we always keep them open. The place is in an awful bad state—it has been neglected for years. When I came of age, I made up my mind to set some money aside to keep it up, every year, but somehow by the end of the year I had generally managed to use up most of it. There, you can see one of the chimneys of the house coming into sight. It's a great place, but it's

only half furnished. One couldn't keep it up properly under ten thousand a year."

The house loomed into view through the mist—a large, barrack-like building, long and low, standing, for a reason possibly known to the architect, on an elevation which effectually deprived it of the protection of the surrounding trees. The whole avenue had been a steep ascent, and in the distance Harry could see nothing but the tops of mountains vaguely appearing through the mists.

Those windows to the right beyond that corner are all empty rooms," said Murray, "and as far as I know, they were never anything else. The member of my family who built this edifice ought to have been shut up as a lunatic. He spent so much on building it, that none of his descendants have been able to keep it up since. Here we are, Harry. I for one won't be sorry to get to a fire; my hands are quite numb, trying to hold these wet reins."

And in another moment, Harry was in the hall, with Sylvia flying down the stairs in her old headlong way to welcome him.

"Keep off, young lady!" he said, "I am simply a mass of wetness."

"Oh, Harry! oh, Harry! I am so glad to see you!" said Sylvia, absolutely dancing up to him in her delight. And Harry looked from her in her gay dress, a dainty little figure making a spot of brightness in the great gloomy old hall, to the hall itself, with its walls lined with heavy black oak, and the massive staircase at the further end. It was a handsome house inside, despite its barrack-like appearance

from without, but as a house for two people to live in, in a lonely neighbourhood—! Harry began to feel sorry for Sylvia.

"Oh, Harry, I wish you were not wet, and then I could have you at once! Alick, bring up Mr. Egerton's portmanteau to his room; and Harry dear, be as quick as you can—won't you?"

"All right; I won't be long," said Harry. "I've a piece of news for you when I come, Sylvia—I don't know whether you will like it or not, but it will interest you, I promise."

"Oh, what is it? Tell me now, Harry, like a dear boy, and it will give me something to think of while you are dressing," said Sylvia, insinuatingly.

"Not a word—not a single word till I come down," said Harry, unrelentingly. "You can try and guess it till then, and that will give you something to think of!"

CHAPTER L.

A GREAT PIECE OF NEWS.

"NOW, Harry dear, sit down on that comfortable chair, and talk to me. What is the piece of news you have to tell me?"

"What a curious little mortal you are!" said Harry, leisurely; "don't be in such a hurry—you mayn't like my news so particularly when you *do* get it."

"Oh you provoking boy! Remember you have only two days here, and don't waste any more time, when we have so much to talk about," said Sylvia, eagerly.

"Well, since you must have it, George is engaged to be married—now the murder's out." And Harry looked at Sylvia with comic alarm, which was half affected, half real. "If you are going into hysterics, or fainting fits, or anything, give me the tip, and I'll call some one, for I'm not up to the business myself."

But Sylvia only flushed a sudden crimson.

"Oh, Harry! George going to be married!" she said, breathlessly.

"Solemn and sad fact," said Harry, establishing himself in a man's position in front of the fire, and surveying Sylvia critically. "You see, when you left

Dublin he had to look out for some one else to fill the post of accompanist to inspiration—does that express the idea?"

"I am awfully surprised!" said Sylvia, still disquieted.

"You see, absence does not always make the heart grow fonder, my dear girl."

"Oh, Harry, don't tease. I wish George had told me—but he never said a word. Who is the girl?"

"A Miss C ements, the daughter of some brewer, with *pots* of money," said Harry. "He knows where to bring his pigs to market: there's no doubt of that."

"Harry, you are detestably vulgar," said Sylvia, irritably. "I am sure all I hope is that George will be happy, and that Miss Clements is capable of making him so."

"Very creditable, I am sure," said Harry. "I haven't as high an opinion of George as you have, you know, and what chiefly occurred to me was, was *he* capable of making her happy. As to him—I only wish I'd as good a chance."

"But what is Miss Clements like?" urged Sylvia.

"I have heard no more than what I have told you, in a letter from Floss. I always thought George as mad as a March hare, but now I see there is method in his madness. Well, it's a comfort one of the family has succeeded in making a little money—by poetry too—though of course they'll cut me in future."

"There is no getting a sensible word out of a boy like you," said Sylvia, impatiently; "I will write to George, but there's no use talking to you."

"All right then; let's change the subject," said

Harry. "If you have any bitter tears to weep, weep them in private."

And probably this bold and summary method of "breaking the news" to Sylvia was the best. Had Floss or even Murray had to tell her, they would have done so with a hesitation which would doubtless have persuaded her she felt the matter deeply. But with Harry, who had no hesitation or delicacies on the subject, any display of sentiment would have been ridiculous.

"Tell me how you like being here, Sylvia?" he said.

"Like being here?—I hate it," she said vehemently. "It was not so bad while people were with us for the shooting, but now, with the winter coming and nothing to do, and no one to speak to from morning till night—!"

"Well, you have Murray," said Harry, gravely.

"Arthur? Why, he is out from morning till night. He is crazy about farming, and just now he is housing cattle, or something—at any rate I know he has been away half the evening, lately."

"Oh—" said Harry, giving a long whistle.

"And then sometimes we have the doctor to dinner—when he hardly opens his lips, and then off he and Arthur go talking about this horrid fishery—Talk of an angel—here comes Arthur.—Arthur, I was just telling Harry how afflicted I am with this stupid doctor of yours."

"For stupid, read indifferent to Sylvia's charms," said Murray, and there was a bitterness in his tone which struck Harry, who was by no means unobservant in his own way.

"Will you come down to the village with me after dinner, Egerton, and judge of him for yourself?"

"No, he will not do anything of the kind," said Sylvia, sharply. "You may do as you like, Arthur, but Harry is not going to leave me all alone this evening."

"Do you allow yourself to be disposed of in this fashion," said Murray, with a forced laugh.

"I will divide the precious privilege of my society," said Harry, lightly—"to-night I will stay with Sylvia, and to-morrow night I should like very much to go down and see this fishery of yours she has been telling me about."

"It's an enterprise on my part—an idea of Wilson's, the doctor here—a very clever fellow, though Sylvia does not think so. We have started a small vessel for deep-sea fishing, halfway between this and the Irish coast, and if we succeed we talk of establishing a regular trade," said Murray.

"Arthur, talking of fishing, do you know that George is engaged?" said Sylvia, cutting ruthlessly into the conversation.

"Really?—Engaged?" said Murray, without rousing himself to any extreme interest in the subject, after one hasty glance at Sylvia.

And then dinner was announced. Harry noticed that Murray drank a good deal of wine while they sat together, after Sylvia had gone to the drawing-room.

"You will excuse my going out for an hour or so," he said to Harry. "I have some things to attend to, and know Sylvia will be anxious to have you all to herself."

And Sylvia evidently was.

We will have a tour of inspection before Arthur comes in," she said gaily. "As you are here, I suppose he will be early."

And then the two went on a desultory expedition over the house, exploring from garret to cellar.

"I haven't even been in some of these rooms, except once with Arthur, when we first came," said Sylvia. "You see, the servants don't like being interfered with; and after all, I know nothing about housekeeping, and would find it a bore. This passage leads to the lumber-room: come and see what we can find of interest there."

But though Sylvia was as bright and gay as ever, Harry could not help seeing that there was something wrong between husband and wife. Sylvia's behaviour to Murray seemed to him the exaggeration of what he had noticed in Dublin, and his to her was much less patient and considerate than it had been there.

CHAPTER LI.

THE FISHERY.

THE next day Harry went shooting with Murray, and Sylvia brought them their lunch, and was in her sunniest and sweetest frame of mind. And in the evening Harry was carried off by Murray.

"There are some boats starting to bring back fish from my trawler," said Murray. "You had better come too, Sylvia. It is moonlight, and it will be a pretty sight."

But Sylvia declined, having no fancy for the four-mile walk her compliance would entail.

"You won't be very late, will you?" she said. "I sha'n't go to bed till you come back, as I shall want to say good-bye to Harry. I believe he will have to start at some unearthly hour in the morning."

Down in the little bay, Harry had his first introduction to Dr. Wilson—a heavily-built, silent man of two or three and thirty, with a sullen expression and a defiant manner. He said little, even to Murray, and that little was entirely about the fishing and the business on hand. As for Harry, he enjoyed the sea, the moonlight, and the picturesque bustle of the boats' start.

"They are going out to fetch home the fish," explained Murray. "At present we have only one vessel, and she stays out at sea for days at a time, with these boats to fetch and carry."

"I should like to go out and stop there to fish," said Harry. "I would if I hadn't to be back to-morrow. Why don't you go yourself, Murray?"

"I shall some day. I should have gone before, only it is so terribly lonely for Sylvia. Indeed I think we have seen everything, and had better go back to the house. You'll come up, Wilson? You may as well."

Murray carried Dr. Wilson off to the billiard-room when they came in.

"I dare say you'll join us after a bit," he said to Harry; and that young gentleman went off to the drawing-room to find Sylvia, and bid her good-bye. She was sitting over the fire, not doing anything, when he came in, and received him with great satisfaction.

"Why, it's not ten," she said. "It is good of you to be so early."

"You'd much better have come with us, instead of sitting here moping," said Harry, in his briskest tones.

"Oh, I am used to it," she said resignedly; "and if you have to go to-morrow—*must* you go to-morrow?"

"Well, I suppose so—unless I were to desert."

"Where's Arthur? Not in, I suppose? Oh, with that horrid doctor. Sit down, Harry, you needn't go to them yet."

"If I stay I shall probably tell you some home truths, and I *do* want to be civil," said Harry, pathetically.

"Home truths!" said Sylvia, sitting up in her chair; "tell me anything you like, I assure you I sha'n't mind."

"Well, then, I should just like to know, to satisfy my curiosity, if it has ever occurred to you that Murray may be dull as well as you?" said Harry, slowly.

"Arthur dull! Oh no, he is not at all dull—he has his farming, and Dr. Wilson to go about with. You needn't waste any pity on him."

"And are there no people in the village for you to make friends with? Surely there must be a clergyman's family?"

"Yes, there is—a Presbyterian clergyman, but he won't let his daughter associate with me, because we used to play tennis on a Sunday when there were men here for shooting."

"Nobody else?"

"Not a soul, except two old ladies who are about eighty. The only people about here under the age of Methuselah were the McPhersons, and they have gone abroad for the winter. I wanted Arthur to take me abroad, but he says it would be too expensive."

Harry looked perplexed.

"No one within driving distance?" he said.

"No one, and no roads to drive on if there were, and nothing for me to drive if there were roads!" said Sylvia, dolefully. "There are two sweet little

ponies and the dearest little trap the McPhersons used to drive, that I want Arthur to buy, but they want a hundred pounds for the lot, and he says it is too much."

"Well, I don't know what to suggest," said Harry, "but I'm sure you could mend matters if you set the right way about it, Sylvia. And as it is— Look here, it's none of my business, and I hope you won't be offended, but it strikes me that Murray drinks rather more wine than is good for him."

"And if he does, how can I prevent it?" exclaimed Sylvia, with sudden vehemence. "It is being with that man, I suppose—that doctor. How can I prevent it?"

"I can't tell you that," said Harry, "but it seems to me you are not going the right way about it, just at present. Good-night, Sylvia; it is decent of you not to be huffed with me, and I really only spoke to you because there is no one else who is likely to here."

CHAPTER LII.

SYLVIA IS BORED.

"GOOD gracious, Arthur, you're not going out in this rain?"

"Yes, I must. I sha'n't be more than an hour, but I must speak about those sheep I told you of."

"I don't remember your telling me; but at any rate I think you might stay with me now," and Sylvia lay back in her chair discontentedly, "just when I am missing Harry so much, too!"

"You might have come with me if it hadn't been raining," said Murray, hesitating.

"Oh, raining!—does it ever do anything but rain here?" said Sylvia, disconsolately.

"Oh, yes; it snows sometimes," said Murray, cheerfully.

"If you've nothing better to say than to make such old jokes as that, I certainly think you had better go to your sheep," said Sylvia, contemptuously.

"Come and help me on with my coat then," said Murray, with unabated good-humour. "Perhaps I shall have gained some original ideas by the time I come back."

"From the sheep, or the shepherds? Dear me, to think that this is only the sixth of November, and that we have months of this kind of thing before us!"

"It really doesn't always rain, even in Sutherlandshire," said Murray, laughing. His serenity was not to be disturbed. He departed in the best of spirits, and Sylvia heard him whistling as he went downstairs.

And there was Sylvia left alone in this big house, with no possible companionship except that of the servants, and even *they* were quite the distance of a short walk from the drawing-room. She felt she could have been more content in a smaller or at least a more compact house. If she could even have heard the servants' voices, or their feet moving about, but no sound at all reached the drawing-room, except the swish of the rain against the windows. It was really very desolate. What in the world was there for Sylvia to do? Read? Neither she nor Murray had intellectual tastes. Perhaps a light and frivolous novel might have tempted her just then in her utter lack of companionship, which she would at any time have preferred. But the only books in the house were of an appallingly serious description. There were no magazines or literature of that calibre lying about in the Murrays' rooms. Neither of them cared to read when there was anything else to do—which was decidedly unfortunate, all things considered. Play? Sylvia tried strumming over a few old tunes, and then she found she was not in the humour for that—in fact, she was not in the humour for anything but a little society, and that there was not much probability of obtaining.

Oh, what a blessing it would be if some one would turn up to amuse her—if only something would happen! Sylvia curled herself up on the sofa, and resigned herself to doleful reflection.

How in the world was she to get through the winter, especially now that Murray had taken up this unfortunate devotion to farming.

She herself had gone in for spasmodic bursts of energy on the subject. Once she had taken up a passion for pigs, for a whole week during which she had been bored, but having obtained all the latest porcine arrangements she grew tired of the fad, and turned her attention to sheep, and then to rabbits, which latter branch of animal culture was not remunerative, but was more amusing than the others, and consequently lasted longer.

But Murray's "fad" did not seem to be of such a passing nature. He also had begun by developing a fancy to purchase all the newest improvements he saw advertised, and had expended a vast amount of breath and energy in endeavouring to persuade his men that they were giving themselves a great deal of extra labour by declining to make any changes. But finally he found himself obliged to yield, and content himself with letting them go on as they had always done.

But he did not give up his farming, and on the whole his people were very kind to him, and were quite willing to let him express his opinions, and even to take the trouble of proving to him that he was mistaken—as, indeed, he generally was.

"The Laird's" freaks were to them a source of

much wonder and amusement, while to Sylvia they caused only irritation. Why should Murray throw away the money that would have taken them to France, or even to Ireland, in such nonsense? So this young lady meditated and pitied herself, till at last she fell asleep.

And when Murray came in later on, he found her lying on the sofa, her ruffled curls straying over her forehead, and her long lashes resting on her soft cheek. She looked such a child—such a soft little frail creature, that he stooped and kissed her gently, moved by an impulse of pity and compunction.

His caress awoke Sylvia.

"Is it time to get ready for dinner, Arthur?" she said sleepily, seeing he was in evening dress.

"No; I only changed now because I was wet," said Murray, sitting down beside her. "It *is* weather!"

"Raining still?"

"I should rather think so! However, I was in shelter some of the time, seeing about getting that thresher I told you about mended."

"Oh," said Sylvia.

"I am afraid farming hasn't been much a success with me as yet—at any rate, as far as making money is concerned," said Murray, dubiously.

"Hasn't it?"

"I am rather down about those young cattle I bought last Tuesday for fattening. McCloskie says they are not thriving, and advises me to get rid of them, but—"

"I assure you *I* don't know anything about it,"

said Sylvia, pettishly ; "for heaven's sake, don't turn out a bore on my hands, Arthur!"

Murray flushed a painful crimson.

"I beg your pardon, I am sure," he said, in a constrained voice.

And then there was silence, till he arose, strangling a yawn, and sauntered out of the room. And Sylvia never knew how deeply she had hurt him—she even forgot what she had said very soon; but he, despite his easy-going lightness, never did.

Murray was by no means an angel, or even perhaps a very good man, and though he had started their life at Eenah with the full intention of atoning by every means in his power for his wrong to Sylvia, and had persisted in his resolution even when the gloss had worn off their reconciliation and he knew she was unchanged, still her unconcealed want of interest in his concerns had not been without its effect on his behaviour to her.

Altogether, more things than Murray's farming were in an unsatisfactory state at Eenah.

CHAPTER LIII.

GEORGE'S WEDDING.

"WHERE are you going this afternoon, Arthur," said Sylvia one day.

"Over to the yard," said Murray, pausing at the dining-room door.

He had not volunteered one single remark to Sylvia about his farming projects since the day when she had told him she hoped he was not becoming a bore, and Sylvia had never noticed the change.

"Come down with me instead, and call at the McCloskies'," she suggested.

"Call on the McCloskies—what the dickens do you want to call on the McCloskies for?" said Murray in surprise.

"Well, politeness partly," said Sylvia, "and partly for something to do."

"The latter reason chiefly, I should think," said Murray, "seeing that you have only called there once since we came to Eenah."

"All the more reason I should go now," said Sylvia, serenely. "Well, will you come?"

"It will be simply deadly," said Murray, hesitating, "and I have some things to do, but—"

"Don't come unless you like," said Sylvia, amiably.

"Well, if you will come round by McIllroy's plantation with me," said Murray; "I have to see a man there about some trees, and then I could go on to the village with you."

"Go round by McIllroy's plantation—a good half-mile out of my way, and through the most awful mud!" said Sylvia. "No, thank you, Arthur. If you can't put off the man there, I shall have to do without the pleasure of your company."

"I can't, so you will have to do without it," said Murray, with sudden, unreasonable anger. He went out of the room, restraining an inclination to bang the door after him. But a little later, as Sylvia was getting ready for her walk to the village, there was a tap at her door, and he put his head in.

"I'll walk round by the village and fetch you," he said.

"Very well, dear," said Sylvia, tranquilly; "I'll meet you at the post-office."

And she was supremely unconscious that his small sentence had cost him any effort.

Sylvia was at the post-office first, either because the McCloskies had proved unbearably stupid, or because Murray's man had kept him longer than he had expected. But when he arrived he received no reproaches for his unpunctuality. Instead, Sylvia ran towards him waving a letter excitedly, in the most unmatronly manner possible.

"George is to be married next month, Arthur," she exclaimed breathlessly.

"Next month," said Murray, with an amused smile

at her excitement; "is he really? That is pretty quick work."

"There is nothing to wait for, you see," said Sylvia; "the girl has plenty of money and can do as she likes. We will have to see about a wedding present at once, Arthur."

"Yes, indeed. Had you better write to Harry to choose one, or to one of the London shops for a list?"

"Harry indeed! Heaven help anybody who trusted to Harry to choose anything! And then, you see there will be my dress to settle about too."

"Your dress!" said Murray. "My dear child, haven't you already about a dozen dresses upstairs which you never wear?"

"Of course I have, seeing that in this place one can only wear the very oldest rags one possesses. But what I meant was a dress for the wedding."

"The wedding?" said Murray.

"Yes, I have no dress that would do for that; I really must get a new one. At a wedding one is expected to be smart."

"But—excuse me, Sylvia, what wedding are you talking about?" said Murray, very gravely.

"Why, George's wedding, of course," Sylvia returned impatiently.

"Do you want to go, then?"

"Do I want to go!" repeated Sylvia, with a dismay which was none the less real that her former certainty on the subject had been assumed; "do I want to go to George's wedding! Why, Arthur!"

"I am very sorry," began Murray; but Sylvia interrupted him.

"If you are going to say you can't leave your farming, we need only be a few days away, Arthur. After all, the journey to Dublin is nothing, Arthur dear," and Sylvia laid her hand caressingly on his arm. "I haven't so many pleasures now. You, with your farming, don't know how lonely it is to me. Oh, Arthur darling, don't be unkind to me! do let us go."

Did it never occur to Sylvia what a return to Dublin would be to her husband? Murray did not know. He was not angry; he knew very well she did not mean her words unkindly; she was simply thinking of her own wishes. He sighed.

"I don't like to disappoint you, dear," he said gently, "but it simply can't be managed."

"Arthur!"

Tears rushed to Sylvia's eyes, and a caressing little hand sought Murray's. She had not given up all hope as yet.

"The fact of it is this," said Murray: "we've got altogether beyond our income somehow, and as for ready money, I positively haven't enough for a journey to Ireland just at present, and one can't go on tick for a railway ticket."

"What nonsense you are talking, Arthur," said Sylvia, relieved; "why, you have only got to sell some of those cattle you have been buying."

"I could only sell them at a dead loss, and I can't afford that, Sylvia darling. I wish it could be managed; but you must give it up for my sake."

"As if you could not get money somehow if you wanted it! Arthur, *do* manage it somehow; ah! won't you manage it?"

"I suppose I could borrow money, like most people," said Murray, "but I don't want to do that."

"It is quite plain you don't want to go yourself!" said Sylvia, sharply.

Murray winced at her words.

"Give it up, and we will go somewhere—anywhere you like—in the spring," he said; "and if my fishery gets on, we may be as rich as Crœsus next year."

But next year was too far away to be much comfort to Sylvia just then. Her disappointment was very bitter.

"It is you who have spent all the money," she said, "and it is I who have to suffer for it! I would never have let them persuade me to go back to you if I had known how selfish you were! You don't mind how much money you spend on yourself, but me—I am to have nothing—no pleasure at all!" And Sylvia broke down into a sob. Never before had she spoken to Murray, or indeed to any one, like this; never before, in truth, had she known what disappointment was. And she was proportionably disturbed.

Murray grew very white.

"You needn't make a scene on the road," he said sternly. "Come, we can get home by crossing this field, and then you can make all the reproaches you wish in private."

"It is no use saying anything," cried Sylvia. "You care for nothing but to please yourself, and—and—you don't mind how miserable I am! as long as you have got that Wilson man to spend your time with—while I have nobody!"

"Have you anything more to say?" said Murray, in a low voice.

"You do not care what I say—I know that! Even Harry Egerton could see that you neglected me—even he noticed you took too much wine, and he told me so."

"Harry Egerton shall never enter my house again," said Murray, between his teeth.

"Oh dear, I wish I had never married you"—and Sylvia broke down helplessly.

"I entirely share your wish," said Murray, speaking with effort; "probably you would prefer me to leave you." And very gravely he turned away, raising his hat slightly, and leaving Sylvia sobbing forlornly.

And she when she reached home grew frightened, and very sorry for what she had said. She had all the long evening to think of it, too, for it was past twelve when Murray came in. Sylvia, in her repentance, had sat up for him. She had been too hard, she felt, and regretted it; Murray should hear she was sorry, and then a few caressing words would make it all right.

Sylvia was frightened by his frowning brows, his unsteady steps and thick utterance. She put off her intended reconciliation till the next morning. And then, when breakfast, a silent, gloomy breakfast was over, she came to him, trying to put her arms round his neck.

"Arthur dear, let us be friends," she said in the caressing tones she had never known to fail. He did not repulse her—that was all that could be said.

"I am sorry for what I said yesterday, and we

mustn't be vexed with one another any longer," she said sweetly.

"Do you think that anything can ever again make things as they were between us?" said Murray, quietly. "Do you think that you can make me forget them by simply saying that you are sorry? Our marriage has been a mistake, Sylvia, but we must put up with it, as a great many other people have to do."

"Arthur, don't say such dreadful things; you frighten me," said Sylvia, piteously.

"I sha'n't say them again," said Murray; "but for once it is better to look things in the face. I can never forget—or forgive what you said to me yesterday, but I have not forgotten either that you have much right to complain of me. Let us agree to make the best of each other, and—"

"And you'll let me go to Dublin, after all, won't you, dear?" said Sylvia, insinuatingly.

Murray sighed very heavily.

"Very well, Sylvia; you shall go to Dublin," he said shortly.

"Oh, you darling—oh, you dear boy!" exclaimed Sylvia, ecstatically flinging her arms round him; "and I have been so unkind to you, and you are so sweet."

Murray drew away from her.

"Don't mistake me, Sylvia," he said coldly, "I am very unwilling that you should go; I simply will not absolutely refuse to allow you."

"It is so good of you—" began Sylvia, jubilantly.

"I shall not go myself," said Murray, shortly.

"Won't you? Oh, what a pity!" said Sylvia, absently. "You musn't be lonely while I am away.

I must see about my dress at once. Where had I better write to, Arthur?"

"Wherever you choose," said Murray, rising. "I hope you will be happy now you have had your own way."

"But don't go yet, before I have thanked you properly or settled anything," cried Sylvia, dancing up to him, her eyes bright with excitement. "Give me a good kiss, Arthur."

"You can do very well without that," said Murray, drawing away from her; "and I am in a hurry—"

"But oh, why do you go away, when you have made me so happy?" said Sylvia.

Murray stood by the door a moment longer, looking into the radiant fair little face which had once been the dearest thing in the world to him. Then he turned away very grave and pale. And as he left the house, he could hear Sylvia running upstairs, singing gaily in her soft soprano the chorus of an old Scotch song—"Begone, dull care."

CHAPTER LIV.

FLOSS GOES TO EENAH.

"PAPA, I am going to make a most startling proposal," said Floss.

"Are you, my dear?" said Mr. Egerton, looking up from his paper and his pipe; "you are certainly not much given to startling me."

"But I shall this time," said Floss. "Papa, if you think you can spare me for a fortnight or so, I should very much like to go to Scotland and pay Sylvia a visit."

"Good heavens!" Mr. Egerton laid down pipe and paper, and looked at Floss with an expression of unconcealed dismay. "I might have known Sylvia Murray was to be thanked for any wild projects on the part of my family! Well, I suppose girls are always wanting to gad about, but I should like to know what is to become of the house and the children while you are away?"

"I don't think I have gadded very much," said Floss, who had never slept out of the house since leaving school, except for two nights at the time of George's wedding. "And as for the children, I will

take Dicky with me, and the twins have really begun to be very useful. I will leave a list of the dinners with the cook, and I really don't think you will be uncomfortable, papa. There are so few in the house now the boys are all away."

But Mr. Egerton was not reconciled yet.

"And the expense of the journey?" he said.

"I have been thinking of that," said she. "Dicky will go half-price, of course, and a second-class ticket to Glasgow or Edinburgh is not very expensive, I know. I don't know yet what will be the best way to go, but I should like to see Harry too, if I could manage it."

"I see you want to make a regular outing of it, young lady," said Mr. Egerton, not unkindly; but his tone seemed to suggest that here was a girl who neglected her family in the constant pursuit of amusement. "But what about dresses? I suppose you will want all sorts of fine garments to go among such gay people?"

"I don't expect I shall see anybody but Sylvia and Mr. Murray," said Floss, quietly; "it is the loneliness that Sylvia feels so much. She has asked me so often to come, and now in this last letter she says she is utterly miserable."

"Upon my word, you must feel very much obliged to her for wanting you to come and be utterly miserable with her."

"As if I had the least intention of being utterly miserable," said Floss, with a smile. "What do you think, papa? Can you spare me, and can we afford it? This is only February, and I shall be back ages

before there is any prospect of Billy coming home."

"You are a good girl, and, I must say, don't often ask for anything for yourself," said Mr. Egerton, with sudden compunction. "Of course you shall go if you like, and as for the money—well, your travelling expenses haven't come on me heavily."

And so Floss gained permission for her expedition, as she expected, without much difficulty. Unless his children's desires directly and obviously interfered with his own, Mr. Egerton refused them nothing. But there was a good deal to be done before she could find herself free to start. She had to provide for the comfort of those left behind as far as possible, to give prophetic instruction to the servants, and instruct the twins in her storeroom mysteries. Then her own wardrobe and Dicky's had to be overhauled and made the most of. And the nearer the day of departure came, the more nervous and distressed grew Floss. How in the world were the household at the Elms to get on without her? How were Dicky and she ever to make their way to such a back-of-the-world place as Eenah—she who had never travelled alone in her life!

To no one did Floss confess her very real if foolish nervousness at the idea of travelling on her own responsibility—not even to Dicky during their journey. He was a little surprised at her silence and gravity—at her want of sympathy with his exuberant delight; but a wiser person than Dicky would not have discovered her nervousness. She was ashamed of it herself.

The intensity of her relief when she found herself, at the end of her journey, on the platform beside Murray, and with all responsibility shifted from her shoulders to his, seemed to her very ridiculous. What a comfort it was to see Murray's familiar face, after having felt herself for so long a stranger among strangers. There was no change in him save his dress, a dark heather kilt and jacket, which suited his tall, upright figure excellently well. He greeted her with the same friendly smile and warm hand pressure as ever.

"I am very glad to see you—it was very good of you to come," he said. "Sylvia is delighted, and would have met you, only there would have been no room for your box. I suppose you know you have a fourteen-mile drive before you—though luckily it is not such a bad day as when Harry was here. Hullo, Dicky, my friend!"

And then Floss, to her secret alarm, was requested to mount to a seat beside Murray, who was driving his tandem as usual, and had not even a man with him on this occasion, to leave room for Floss's paraphernalia, including Dicky.

"It was so good of you to come; it is so lonely for Sylvia," Murray repeated; "but I am afraid it will be very dull for you, though I dare say we can manage to amuse Master Dicky."

"Dicky is intensely happy just at present," said Floss, who was holding the small boy firmly by the arm, and doing her best to keep him still.

And then Dicky considered that he had been silent quite long enough, and proceeded to take a prominent part in the conversation.

It must be confessed that Floss was hardly sufficiently at her ease to enter with much interest into conversation during those fourteen long miles. Between the badness of the road, the friskiness of the tandem, and Murray's driving, which seemed to her reckless, she breathed a very heartfelt sigh of relief when she found herself in the avenue at Eenah. There was wind instead of mist this day, and she could see more of her surroundings than Harry had been able to do, but neither was it a very prepossessing afternoon. The whistling wind made Floss shiver as it swept through the trees, and the house itself looked even more bare and desolate than usual, standing out against the dull, leaden background of the sky.

But Sylvia at least looked neither dull nor dreary when she appeared a bright little figure on the doorstep, eager to greet her guests. Floss looked at her, and wondered if, after all, she had taken that last letter of hers as more urgent than the writer had intended it to be; but when she remembered the words she could not think so. "I beg and entreat of you to come and see me," Sylvia had written; "I have not had a soul to speak to since George's wedding, and I shall go mad if we are alone here much longer. Arthur is out half the night, and I get so frightened and miserable sitting here all alone, with the servants far away at the other end of the house I sha'n't stand it much longer if you don't come."

And now here was Sylvia looking her brightest and prettiest, eagerly racing about over the house with Floss and Dicky.

And till they went to bed that night her cheerfulness remained unchanged. Except a certain coolness and civil indifference between her and Murray, Floss noticed nothing amiss. But when she went to her room early, as she was a little tired, Sylvia came with her, prepared, it was at once evident, to relate her troubles. Floss's room was a large one, so large that candles on the mantelpiece only lighted half of it, leaving many corners in cold and darkness. But by the fire there was a cosy nook, which was warm and cheerful, and there Sylvia drew up an armchair for Floss, and seated herself on the rug at her feet.

"It is nice to have you, Floss," she said, laying her curly head against the other girl's knee. "I don't mind hearing the wind whistling when I have you, but when I am all alone it sends me nearly mad. I should like to go and sit in the servants' hall, but then I know the servants would not like it."

"I am sure if Mr. Murray knew how lonely you were," began Floss, with some hesitation.

"Arthur—oh, you don't know him now. He has never forgiven me for going to George's wedding; and it's a shame, isn't it, for he let me go? Besides, he says he *must* go to see about this fishing."

"Well, you see, Sylvia, when a thing is necessary, that makes a difference," said Floss, twisting the girl's curls round her fingers.

"But I don't believe it is the least necessary for him to go every night," said Sylvia, crossly; "you see he could stay to-night well enough, and I believe

he did it just because he knew I wanted to talk to you alone."

"Sylvia! you are most awfully unjust," said Floss. Such a proceeding would have been so foreign to Murray's whole character, that she almost laughed at the idea.

"Are you going to take his side, like all the rest?" said Sylvia, pettishly. "There is not a servant in the house that does not think the sun rises and sets on Arthur, whatever he does; and I believe they would think the same if he were to murder me."

Floss found herself, as usual, beginning to treat and look upon Sylvia as a child.

"I am not going to take anybody's part," she said, "and you are not going to quarrel with me to-night, are you, Sylvia?"

Sylvia took Floss's hand and kissed it, with one of her sudden impulses.

"Am I being horrid to you, you dear Floss," she said, "and just after you have been so good, and come so far?"

"You have only been talking nonsense," said Floss. "Shall we go and have a look at Dicky next door?"

But this panacea for all ills did not seem to commend itself to Sylvia.

"Never mind Dicky," she said. "You don't know what a comfort it is to me to have some one to talk to—to say anything to. Oh, Floss, if I am cross it is no wonder! You don't know how miserable I am.'

"I am very sorry," said Floss; "you won't be so lonely now I am here, will you?"

"It isn't only loneliness," said Sylvia, laying her cheek against Floss's fingers; "I would rather be alone sometimes than—with Arthur."

"Sylvia!"

"Yes," said Sylvia in a low voice, "you don't know how he has changed, Floss. Nobody knew what it would be when you all made me go back to him."

"Sylvia," said Floss, "is he unkind to you?"

It was a long time now since Murray had descended from the pedestal on which Floss had placed him one sunny July nearly three years ago; but still, that he would be wilfully unkind to any one, much less to Sylvia, she would not believe.

"He does not beat me, if that is what you mean!" said Sylvia, with a shaky laugh. "But—when he is sober, he neglects me; and when he is drunk—and that is very often—" she ended in a hard voice.

"Oh, Sylvia, my poor child!" said Floss, bending over to kiss her, and perhaps to hide her own face. The fire was getting low, and in the silence some of the ashes fell down into the grate with a little thud.

"Yes," said Sylvia again, "he drinks down there at the fishery like any common man, I suppose; and they say," she added, colouring, "they say there is—some one in the village. I don't know—I never ask."

Floss said nothing, she only held Sylvia closely to her.

"It is pleasant for you, isn't it?" said the girl; "but you would know all about it sooner or later. There, I won't keep you any longer, or your fire will go out. Good-night."

CHAPTER LV.

FLOSS'S VISIT TO EENAH.

NEXT morning Sylvia flitted into Floss's room before breakfast, looking as bright and gay as a lark.

"I have made so many attempts to get you here, that I doubted whether you had really come this morning when I awoke," she said gaily. "Dicky and I have already been in communication, and have arranged for battledore-and-shuttlecock after breakfast. That won't suit you, Floss; so I wish you would go out with Arthur for a bit. He goes round the farm every morning, and he likes some one to go with him so much."

There was nothing either sad or tragic about Sylvia this morning, but Floss's mood could not change so easily.

"Are you sure he would not rather be by himself, if he is busy?" she said, with some embarrassment.

"I am quite sure that Arthur would *never* rather be by himself," said Sylvia, laughing. "I will propose it to him if you don't like to, and if it will not bore you too much."

And Sylvia was as good as her word.

"Arthur," she said at breakfast, "Floss is going

round the farm with you this morning, if you would like it."

And Murray turned to her with his old friendly smile.

"That is very good of you," he said, "and will be very pleasant for me, if you are sure it will not bore you?"

Floss did not think it was at all likely to bore her, and said so.

"I remember that at any rate you used to take an interest in chickens," said Murray, with a smile; "so if the weather doesn't frighten you, you mayn't find it as bad as Sylvia used to do."

"Oh, Floss shall put on her strongest boots," said Sylvia; "I will look out for the thickest soles. Floss, that child will surely choke himself if he goes on putting such large pieces into his mouth."

And Sylvia having thus unprovoked declared war upon Dicky, there was no more peace during breakfast. Indeed, peace in a house that contained both Sylvia and Dicky was a thing unknown. They had become more amicable by the time Murray and Floss went out.

Floss was very warmly arrayed, according to the recommendation both of Sylvia and Murray, and though there was certainly a good deal of slush and mud to be waded through during their expedition, she had been well trained to such things in Ireland.

Neither did she find it at all a bore to hear about Murray's farming and fishing projects; nor even object to be introduced to Dr. Wilson, who had come up to speak to him about something connected with the boats.

And after he was gone a heavy snow shower came on, and she and Murray took shelter in a hay-loft, where Floss seated herself among the piles of hay, and Murray lay at her feet.

"Well," he said, "you don't think Dr. Wilson such an unredeemed sinner as Sylvia does, I hope?"

"I think he has got one of the saddest faces I ever saw," said Floss.

"And I don't believe Sylvia has ever known what a moment's trouble was," said Murray, a little bitterly, "and so she can see no excuse for him."

Floss was not anxious to get on the subject of Sylvia.

"Has he a story—Dr. Wilson, I mean?" she said.

"I dare say he has, though I don't know it; and, you see, having known the poor fellow all his life, I don't care to give him up," said Murray; "besides, there is no one else here to speak to—and—I, of all people, have no right to be a Pharisee."

And Murray turned away his head, flushing, and busily making the hay into wisps as he spoke.

"I have been a bad bargain for Sylvia," he said, "and I am afraid she isn't happy here. It's not a particularly comfortable house for any one to stop in, I am ashamed to say, but you have always been so good—"

"It is very pleasant for me to have been able to come," said Floss, with a desperate clinging to commonplaces.

"Do you remember the days when you used to be my confessor?" said Murray, still with his face hidden. "That is the reason I can speak to you like

this. I suppose Sylvia has told you about—me, and what I want you to believe is that I have some good in me still."

"You know I do believe it," said Floss, rising abruptly, "and if I can be of any good to Sylvia I shall be very glad. We must go in now, Mr. Murray, for the rain is over."

And to herself Floss was saying, "If this goes on, I shall not be able to stay long."

But after that first day things were less difficult. Floss could listen to Murray without a painfully vivid remembrance of their conversations long ago.

And certainly an improvement seemed to have come to Eenah. Murray seldom, if ever, spent his evenings in the village now, and he and Sylvia were friendly, if cold. Dr. Wilson, too, became less determined to confine himself to the billiard-room on his visits to Eenah, and was by no means unwilling to find himself in Floss's company.

"You have tamed, if not reformed the bear," said Sylvia, in delighted amusement. "A little mild flirtation would be a great cheer up to me; do you think he is educated up to that point yet?"

"I am afraid not yet," said Floss, laughing.

"Well, if things go on like this I shall make a point of getting Arthur to ask him his intentions," said Sylvia, "though I must say I much prefer my own choice for you—Captain Crayshaw!"

But matters did not long remain in this satisfactory condition.

Sylvia was at first delighted that Murray should stay at home and make himself agreeable to Floss,

and that Dr. Wilson should be tamed by her society.

It made the house much pleasanter and less lonely. But after a time she began to perceive, to her own unmitigated astonishment, that she herself was beginning to play a secondary part. It was very extraordinary.

That Floss, of all people, should be preferred to her —Floss, who had never in her life occurred to Sylvia in the light of a rival! But it was undoubtedly a fact that a few gracious words from her did not make Dr. Wilson show the least desire to transfer his allegiance; and though she had no doubt an advance on her part would make Arthur as devoted as ever, still he seemed uncommonly fond of talking to Floss.

Of course it was a very good thing that he should give up his visits to the village to a great extent, and that he should never once have taken more wine than was good for him since Floss's arrival. Still—still it was an undoubted fact that Sylvia was beginning to wish for the end of her visit.

A fact, too, that her newborn civility to Dr. Wilson relapsed into positive rudeness, and that an indefinable something came into her manner to Floss, which the latter vaguely felt, and then blamed herself for imagining.

Floss did not quite know what to think of the state of things at Eenah: sometimes she hoped they were improving, sometimes Sylvia's manner filled her with dismay. With regard to Murray, she began to wonder if what Sylvia had told her on the night of her arrival had not been exaggerated. Whatever

his wife's manner might be, he was always consistently friendly and considerate; and as for Sylvia, for a long time Floss refused to believe that she could be unwelcome in this house to which she had been so earnestly entreated to come.

But at last one day Sylvia left her no longer any possibility of mistake.

Floss had come in from one of her farmyard tours of inspection with Murray, those same tours which Sylvia had urged upon her on her arrival, and she came into the drawing-room to find Mrs. Murray sitting by the fire in a most disconsolate frame of mind.

Floss, flushed with cold and exercise, was looking very bright and almost pretty, and was in a most cheerful frame of mind.

"Where's Dicky?" she said, ignoring the ill-humour expressed in every line of Sylvia's small person.

"I don't know, I am sure," said Sylvia, in the pettish tone that had grown on her since her marriage, but was chiefly reserved for Murray. "He is getting most fearfully troublesome, and I really wish you would not stay out and leave him in my charge so long."

"I have only been over the farm with Mr. Murray," said Floss, surprised at Sylvia's tone.

"You have taken a very long time to go over the farm," said Sylvia, disagreeably. "It is a great pity it is not you who are Arthur's wife."

"Sylvia, *what* do you mean?" said Floss, flushing.

In truth Sylvia meant nothing but to make herself disagreeable.

"I don't mean anything," she said. "If you choose to spend the whole day with Arthur, I don't mind in the least, only I wish you would not leave Dicky on my hands."

"Sylvia!" exclaimed Floss, too utterly dismayed just then for anger.

Had she been too much with Murray?

Had Sylvia any reason for her words?

"I certainly never expected you to speak to me like this, Sylvia, she said, in a low voice; "I think you are both unkind and unjust. The best thing I can do is to arrange to go home to-morrow—I suppose it could not very well be managed to-day?"

"You can do as you like about that," said Sylvia. "I don't want to turn you out, I am sure, but if you choose to take offence—"

"Of course I shall go," said Floss, more steadily.

And only then did she realise, with a pang of pain and dismay, what going away would mean to her.

The sooner she went home the better, after all, she thought, with anger which was more for herself than Sylvia.

At luncheon she mentioned her departure to Murray, carefully choosing a time when Sylvia was present.

"Would it be convenient for you to send me to the station to-morrow, Mr. Murray," she said, just before she and Sylvia left the room.

"To send you to the station! What on earth do you want to go to the station for?" said Murray, with startled abruptness.

"Because Dicky and I are going to make our way home," said Floss.

"Home!" exclaimed Murray, flushing suddenly. "You are not going home now—yet. You said nothing about it yesterday. Sylvia, do you hear? It is absurd for Miss Egerton to talk of going to Ireland at present, isn't it?"

All this time Sylvia had been silent. Silent, and for the first time in her life experiencing what it was to be thoroughly jealous.

She had not wasted much effort in endeavouring to retain Murray's affection. She had taken it for granted that, having been once in love with her, he would always remain so. He was her own special possession, and there must be no suspicion of his wavering in his allegiance.

"It is for Floss to decide what she wants to do," she said coldly.

Murray looked at her with astonishment.

"Try and persuade Miss Egerton to stay with us a little longer," he said.

"I will leave that to you," said Sylvia, rising. "You are much more likely to succeed."

The door closed after her with a bang, and Murray stared blankly at Floss.

"What does she mean?" he said. "Has she been disagreeable to you? Is that why you speak of going?"

"I speak of going because it is really necessary," said Floss, steadily. "You know how hard it is for me to get away from home."

"They don't need you there as much as we do

here," said Murray, earnestly. "Don't let a few pettish words from Sylvia drive you away! I know it is a pleasure to her to have you—she has been looking forward to it for so long. And as for me—"

"It is very kind of you to say all this," said Floss.

"It is not kind at all!" said Murray, vehemently. "If you knew what a difference it makes to this house to have you here—to have somebody who is always ready to talk and sympathise! I am sure I must have bored you often since you came here."

"You have not bored me at all—I have enjoyed being here very much," said Floss, quietly; "but everything must come to an end, however pleasant."

"But not so soon," pleaded Murray; "not in such a hurry! Stay a week longer. You have not seen any of the pretty walks about here."

"I really must go," said Floss, rising.

Murray rose too, and moved to open the door for her.

"If you have made up your mind, there is no use in my saying any more," he said sullenly.

But if he said no more to Floss just then, he did not let Sylvia off so easily. When he found she was not in the drawing-room, he followed her upstairs and went to her room.

She was then curled up on the sofa with a book in her hand, a fact which in itself proved there was something abnormal in the state of her feelings. She greeted Murray with a pout and a frown on her pretty face, which made her look more absurdly like a naughty child than ever. But he was much too angry to be inclined to treat her anything but

seriously. He shut the door behind him with unnecessary emphasis, and remained standing where he was.

"What have you been saying to Miss Egerton?" he said sharply.

Sylvia mutinously shrugged her shoulders.

"Why such tragedy airs?" she said contemptuously. "What is all this fuss about? I simply told Floss that Dicky had been very troublesome when you and she were out this morning, and she chose to take offence."

"It was more than that," said Murray, obstinately.

"Oh, has she been abusing me to you?" said Sylvia.

"You know perfectly well that she hasn't," said Murray, vehemently.

"Don't lose your temper," returned Sylvia, with provoking coolness. "Don't you think this kind of quarrelling is rather vulgar? If nothing will content you but the whole truth, I will tell you, though I dare say you won't like it."

"Tell me," said Murray.

"The fact is," said Sylvia, giving herself a little wriggle into a more comfortable position on the sofa, "that though personally I don't care in the least, I object on principle to raise a scandal in this very easily scandalised neighbourhood, and I also object to be left in charge of a very troublesome and naughty little boy, while you and Floss ramble over the country together."

And then she began to feel considerably frightened, and did not venture to look at Murray.

He did not speak for a few minutes—not till the silence was becoming so oppressive that she was gathering her courage to look at him.

"I suppose this is what you said to Floss?" he said at last, very quietly. But from that very quietness in his slow voice, Sylvia knew he was roused to the bitter anger which was very rare with him.

"Oh dear, why will you make a fuss?" she said petulantly. "I think I had better go to Ireland instead of Floss—it is very evident that you would rather she would stay!"

"Is it so very strange if I should wish a person to stay who is always bright and kind and sweet-tempered," said Murray—"who thinks of everybody but herself, and makes the house comfortable as it never was before?"

"You ought to have married her!" said Sylvia, bitterly; "it is really a great pity you did not marry her!"

"I wish I had," said Murray, shortly.

"You are admirably frank," said Sylvia. "I was right enough, you see, when I thought you cared for her."

"You were quite right," said Murray, in a constrained voice. "I have to thank you for informing me of the fact, however, for this morning I did not know it myself. But as for her"—he paused—"don't insult her by daring to think she has ever looked upon me except as a friend and your husband."

"That is all very fine," said Sylvia, shrugging her shoulders. "You know very well it is not the truth. If you have nothing more to say to me—"

"I have this to say to you," said Murray: "I suppose you will agree with me when I say that it is impossible for us to live together any longer?"

"I shall be very glad to agree with you," said Sylvia.

"You as well as I realise by this time what a mistake our marriage has been," pursued Murray. "If you are willing, I will write to your father to-night, and nobody shall bring us together again this time. Are you willing?"

"Quite willing."

"Then there is no more to be said?"

"No more; so I think you had better go down and entertain Floss, as I certainly shall not; but I would be very much obliged if you would dispose of Dicky at the same time, for I hear him in the passage."

"You shall not be troubled with him, but you will oblige me by being civil to Miss Egerton while she is in this house."

And then Murray walked out of the room.

Sylvia's serene attitude and contemptuous smile lasted till the door had closed behind him. Then she gave way to sobs and tears, hiding her face in the sofa cushion. She was very miserable indeed, and, what was more, bitterly jealous.

As long as Murray's love had been unmistakably hers she had valued it little, but now that she was beginning dimly to realise that she had lost it for ever, never before had he seemed to her so desirable.

CHAPTER LVI.

WHAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN.

MURRAY met Dicky in the passage in a rather disconsolate frame of mind. Everybody was very dull to-day, he had decided, and no amusement seemed to be obtainable anywhere.

"Where is Sylvia?" he said; "I have nothing to do, and I want her to play battledore-and-shuttlecock, if she is not too cross."

"Never mind Sylvia," said Murray, hastily; "go and put on your hat and coat, and I will take you out."

After all, if Murray was not very fond of Dicky personally, at least he was Floss's brother, and there would be comfort as well as annoyance in his company. Plenty of annoyance, for Dicky was always troublesome, but at any rate it was better than letting Sylvia have any excuse for further complaint.

"Can I go?" exclaimed Dicky, delightedly. "Don't tell Floss, for it is going to snow, and she will say I must not."

"Oh, you can go," said Murray, scarcely heeding him. "Get ready, and wait for me in the hall; I want to speak to your sister."

"Is it to ask her if I may go?" said Dicky, anxiously.

"It has nothing at all to do with you," said Murray, with a sudden laugh.

He went on to the drawing-room.

Floss was sitting by the fire in a low chair, knitting, and he went straight over to her and stood beside her, looking down at her.

"I have come to say that I think you are quite right in deciding to go," he said. "Apologies for Sylvia's behaviour to you are useless. I will force her to apologise to you herself if you wish, as she has neither the good taste or good feeling to do so of her own accord."

"Oh, Mr. Murray," said Floss, flushing, "she said nothing—I want no apologies. You are angry now, and you will be sorry afterwards for speaking in this way."

"No, I shall not," said Murray, roughly. "I was desperately fond of Sylvia once, and imagined she was an angel because she had a pretty face—"

"She is so young—"

"It is no use. If I were to discover that she was an epitome of all the virtues, it would be too late now," said Murray, bitterly. "For this once I shall tell you the whole truth. Sylvia was right enough in being jealous of you. Thank God, you care nothing for me—like a fool, I threw away my chance when I might perhaps have had one. This house has been a different place since you came here, and my life has been different. I swear to you that till to-day I did not know what you were to me, and that after to-day I shall never speak to you like this again."

They were both very white. Floss sat still, trying to conquer the sudden guilty pang of joy which his words had brought her. And he thought her too pure and good to care!

Ought she not to confess her unworthiness to him? And then Floss, recognising the temptation, realised what a relief it would be to tell him all. Recognised, too, what the confession, the knowledge of her love, would mean to a man like Murray.

"I have hurt and vexed you," he said humbly, as she did not speak, "yet if I ever make anything of my life it will be thanks to you. God bless you—I know how immeasurably above me you are." He stooped and reverently kissed her hand.

Then he left the room in silence, left it before Floss had gained voice to say one single word of comfort or encouragement.

The thoughts that thronged into her head a moment after must all remain unspoken now, for she realised that there must be no further words on this subject between them. What a miserable, wicked girl she was—she of whom he thought so highly.

Why could she not restrain that unreasonable feeling of gladness and exultation? He loved her. In spite of everything, though they must never speak of it again, never meet again if they could help it, still nothing could ever make that untrue!

CHAPTER LVII.

IN THE SNOW.

It was nearly nine o'clock. Dinner had been gone through—a dreary *tête-à-tête* dinner, during which Sylvia and Floss exchanged as few words as possible, and then the former had gone back to her room.

At nine o'clock Floss came along the passage, and tapped at the door of Sylvia's room.

"Sylvia, may I come in?"

Sylvia came to the door and opened it, standing there with unfriendly countenance.

"I could not help coming to you," Floss said, with humble haste. Was it not for her to be humble to Sylvia, in remembrance of the great wrong she had done her? "I am getting so frightened about Dicky. I hear Mr. Murray took him out after lunch, and they have never been in since."

"That is not at all unusual," said Sylvia, coldly.

"But I am sure Mr. Murray would not keep Dicky out so long," urged Floss, "unless something has happened. And it has been snowing for hours."

"I really can't help it," said Sylvia, shortly. "I suppose Arthur is down at the fishery, but probably you know better than I."

"But would you send somebody down?" pleaded Floss.

"In this snow?" remarked Sylvia. "The servants would scarcely thank me if I sent them two miles at such an hour on such a night as this, and Arthur would be highly gratified."

Floss turned unwillingly away.

"I might at least go down to the gate," she said.

"Oh, yes, if you like," said Sylvia, pettishly. "Arthur ought to be flattered."

She shut the door, leaving Floss no time to reply, and the latter went sadly downstairs into the hall, and opened the door to look out into the night. There was no sign of anybody. It was very dark, and the snow was falling steadily enough. Floss shivered as she wrapped herself in a shawl. Ridiculous though it might be, she could restrain her uneasiness no longer. It was certainly very strange that Murray should keep out delicate little Dicky on such a night as this, and when he knew she would be anxious, unless—and Floss shivered when she remembered what Sylvia had told her about his nights in the village.

The snow was fairly deep on the avenue, but she could guide herself by the trees, and on the road she managed to make her way by keeping close to the hedge on one side. Besides, the snow itself prevented total darkness. It was very strange to find herself alone on the silent road. The snow fell with soft regularity, covering her hat and her shoulders.

She plodded on steadily enough, but the stillness was oppressive. She was getting near the village

now—when she turned the next corner she would see it; and as she realised this, in a sudden revulsion of feeling she began to wonder how she would meet Murray's astonishment—for of course he would be astonished.

Then a dark figure came round the corner with a suddenness that startled her, though she might have recollected she could not have heard an advance in the snow.

Floss remembered afterwards, with surprise, that personally she was not conscious of being in the least alarmed. The night, the lonely road, and the solitary man's figure, only immediately renewed her fears that something had happened.

She had been beginning to think that perhaps Sylvia had been right—she would have been better at home; but now in a moment this feeling vanished. When the advancing man seemed inclined to pass her, she had no hesitation about stopping him.

"Are you going up to Eenah?" she said.

"Good God! Miss Egerton!" exclaimed he, and Floss recognised Murray's voice; "have you heard—but no—it is impossible—"

"I have heard nothing," said Floss, breathlessly. "What has happened? You are safe—it is Dicky?"

"Yes, it is Dicky," said Murray.

He took her hand and drew it through his arm, and together they turned to the village.

It seemed to Floss as if she knew everything, as if there was no more to be said.

"Is he dead?" she asked mechanically, but she did not seem to require an answer

"I don't know," said Murray, in a low tone.

"How did it happen?"

"He was on the pier—it is very slippery at the end," said Murray, in a hard voice.

"And where were you?"

"I," said Murray, bitterly—"I was not even there when it happened. I have not even the small consolation of having done my best to save him."

They had been walking quickly on as they spoke in hurried sentences, and as they reached the village a silence fell between them. Murray broke it at last.

"It is not my fault that I insult you with my presence," he said; "if I had not met you I would never have gone near you again. The truth is this. When I left the house this afternoon I made up my mind never to drink again. I broke that resolution, as I have broken a great many others. If I had been sober and looked after Dicky, this would not have happened. Here, this is the house where he is; I shall not go in."

And Murray turned away into the darkness.

As for Floss, she went steadily enough into the house. The kitchen was full of people, but there was a compassionate hush as she entered, and they made way for Dr. Wilson, who came forward to her.

"You have heard?" he said. "I must prepare you for the worst—"

"I know," said Floss, and she followed him silently into the next room.

She was very quiet and composed. Even the still little form on the bed moved her to no show of emotion. He had been troublesome to other people,

but to Floss he had never been troublesome. He had been a favourite with nobody, but perhaps for that very reason he had been dearer to Floss, and more entirely her own. What was even Murray to her then, in this grief which she felt no one could share?

. . . . .

Three days later, Murray and Sylvia had another interview. He came into her room, looking very white and grave.

"I suppose you have been wondering what had become of me these last few days?" he said.

"Not at all," replied Sylvia, standing by the window, her little figure very stiff and erect. "The only thing that surprised me was to hear that you had been to the funeral this morning."

"I have not been drinking, if that is what you mean," said Murray, quietly. "I stayed away simply because I thought it would be pleasanter to Floss. Where is she?"

"She is in her room, but I will call her if you like," said Sylvia, with sarcastic sweetness.

"I have no intention of ever seeing her again," said Murray, steadily; "what I came for was to talk to you."

"I am immensely flattered, I am sure."

"I am going to London to-night," said Murray, abruptly.

"To London!"

The pretty pink faded out of Sylvia's cheeks, and consternation succeeded her ironical composure.

"As we agreed, I wrote to your father a couple of

days ago, and I had a telegram to-day to say he was coming to fetch you," pursued Murray.

Sylvia was still silent, her eyes filling with dismayed tears.

"Business arrangements I suppose you will leave to your father," he went on. "And you can explain things as you like to every one. I have given no reasons."

"And—what is going to become of you?" said Sylvia, with a sob in her voice.

"I am flattered by your interest," said Murray, coldly. "I shall carry out my old project of joining the Turkish army. I have made arrangements, and I have settled about the farm here. Dr. Wilson will undertake the fishery."

"Oh," said Sylvia, "then you have quite made up your mind?"

"Made up my mind?—of course I have," said he composedly. "There is no use prolonging the business of saying good-bye. I hope we part good friends, Sylvia, and that you will forgive me for having been such a bad husband to you."

He took her hand, and stooped and kissed her cheek coldly enough; but Sylvia clung to him, suddenly breaking down into sobs and tears.

"Don't go away! Oh, I don't want you to go away!" she cried.

"Look here, Sylvia, this is nonsense. You yourself agreed with me that the best thing for us is to part, and I thought I was attending to your wishes as well as my own."

"But I don't want it. I will stay on here—oh,

Arthur, I will, really! I can stand it—I would rather—"

"But *I* can't stand it," he said slowly.

"Don't you mind my going away? Aren't you sorry? Don't you care about me any longer?" pleaded Sylvia, piteously.

"Sylvia, listen to me," said Murray, putting her away from him and looking at her steadily. "You know very well that in a day or two things would be as bad as ever. You would be miserable, and so should I. Let me go, my dear—it will be better for us both. I do not think you really care much for me, and—I do not care for you, as I used to do."

Sylvia pulled her hands away from him, and threw herself on the sofa, sobbing bitterly.

"You don't love me—you love Floss."

"It is quite true," said Murray, without flinching; "I don't love you, and I do love Floss, but I shall never see her again as long as I live."

Sylvia sobbed on.

"Good-bye," said Murray. He laid his hand gently on her ruffled curly head; then he quietly left the room.

And Sylvia, with her face in the cushions, sobbed on, miserable, piteous sobs. Floss found her there an hour later when she came in, in her black dress, and Sylvia was ready to cling to her, forgetful of the coldness of their half-reconciliation, forgetful of everything, except that she was very miserable, and wanted some one to recount her woes to.

But Floss could not forget so easily, though she would not repulse the girl.

"Arthur is gone to Turkey, and I am miserable," sobbed she.

She was too absorbed in her own sorrows even to wonder how the news would affect Floss. A start and a sudden white look in her sad face were all the outward changes, and she did not speak.

"Oh, what shall I do?—what shall I do?" Sylvia wailed. "And Arthur promised to take me to London in the spring, and now I shall go nowhere but to Delagherty—nowhere as long as I live! Oh, I don't believe you are listening! What does it matter to you—*you* don't care!"

"I am sorry for you," said Floss, in a low voice.

"And I have not even a decent hat to wear going home!" said Sylvia, with a fresh burst of sobs.

THE END.

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